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THE ANNUAL 2022

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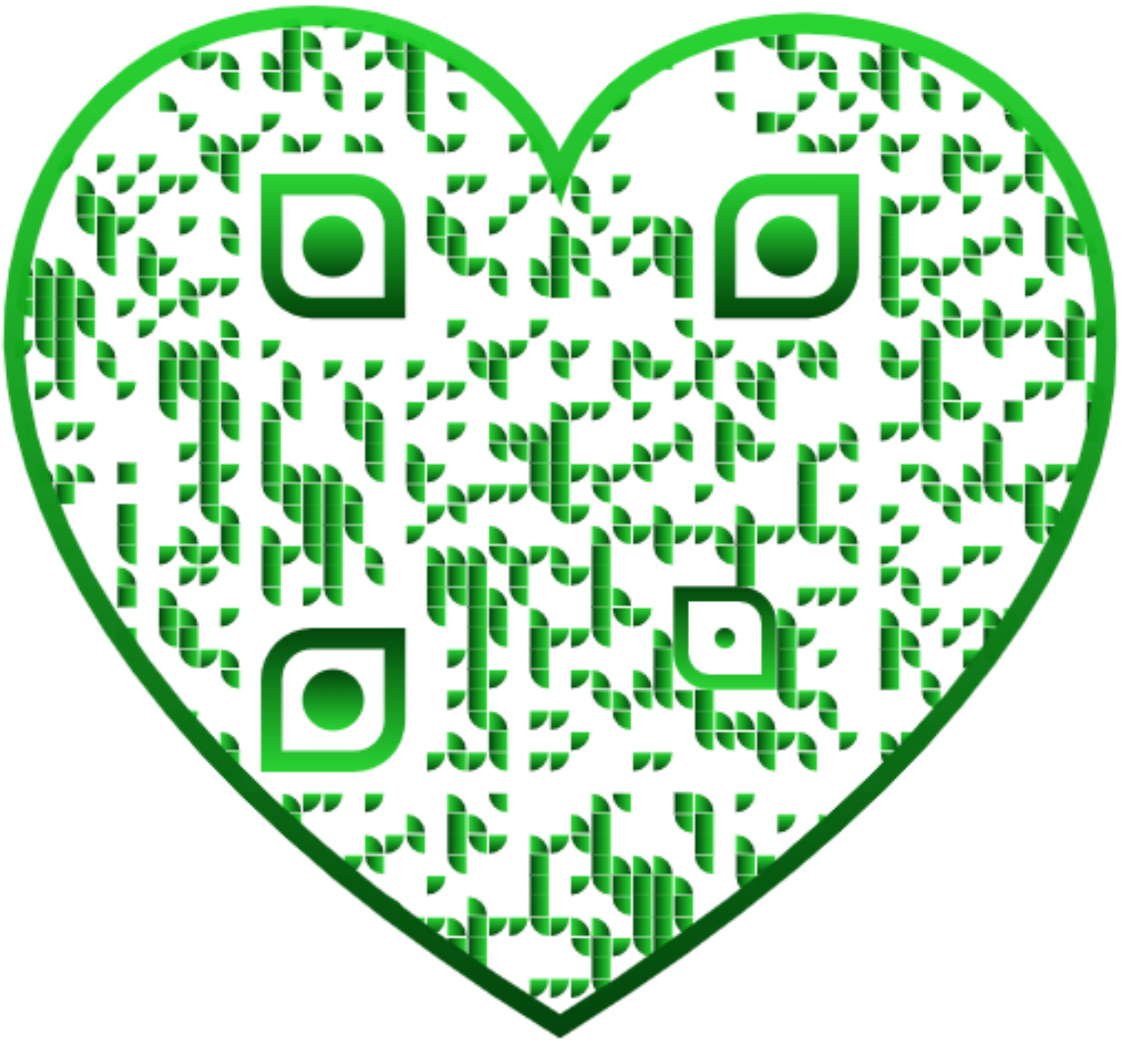

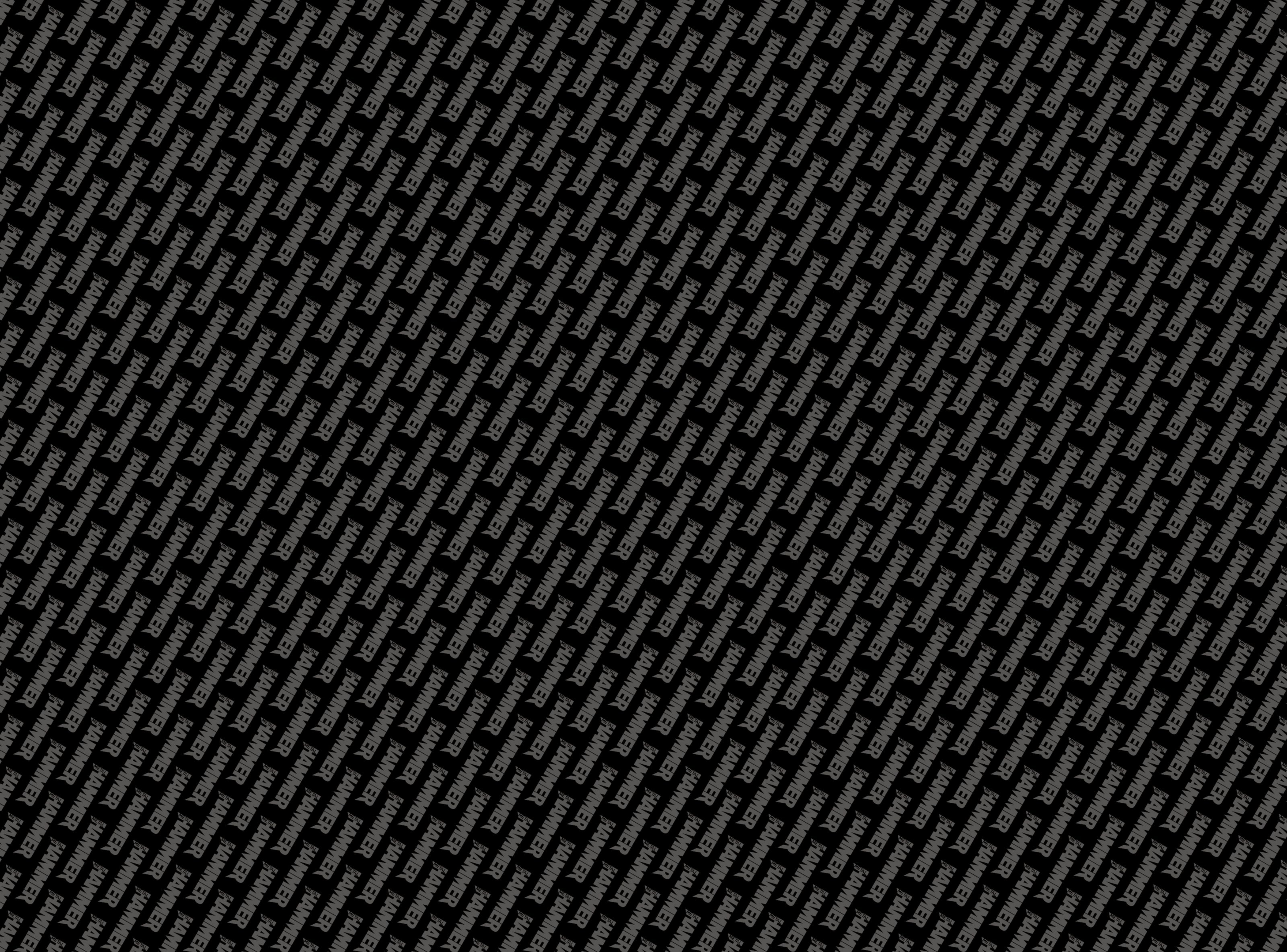
THE HAWKER

WE LIVE IN HISTORIC TIMES

I DON'T THINK a single one of us could have imagined we'd live through an era like the one we've all experienced over the past 18 months. Since our last Metal Hammer Annual in 2019, the world has changed unrecognisably from the one we knew before, and even as I type this, we don't fully know when or how it'll return to normality.

One thing that remains as true now as ever, though? That metal is the most fun, fearless, ridiculous, passionate and exhilarating music scene in the world. On that note, it's been a pleasure picking through the many stories we've brought you over the past year to put together the Best-Of mag you currently hold in your hands. From the majestic return of Iron Maiden to the rise of some of the most exciting bands we've seen for years, to the loss of some true icons, it's been a time of ups, downs and everything in between. And yet, metal keeps moving, and so do we. So, if you like what you read in this Annual, don't forget to check us out every single month on newsstands around the world, or by ordering direct to your door at tinyurl.com/gethammer. Cheers for your support, and have a safe end to the year.

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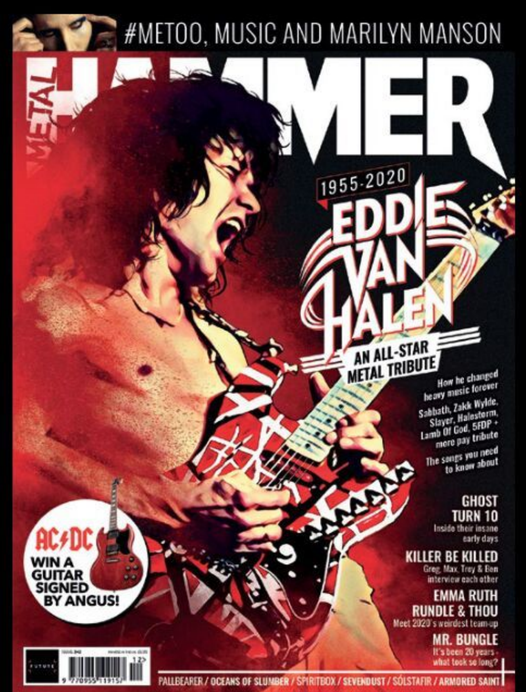

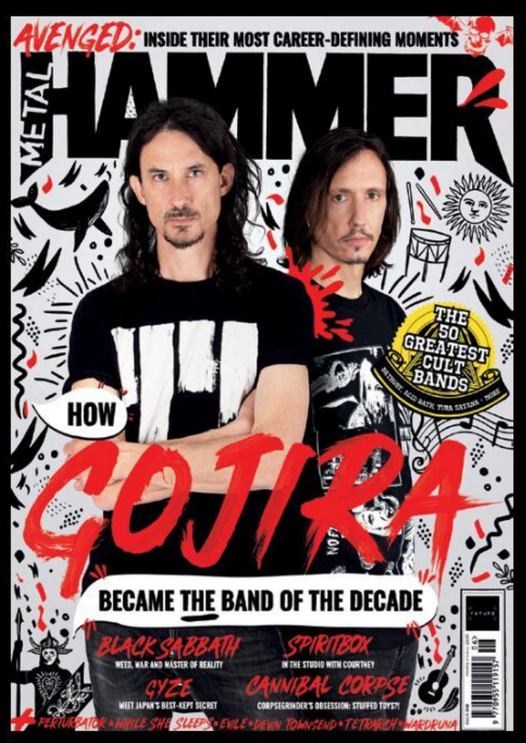

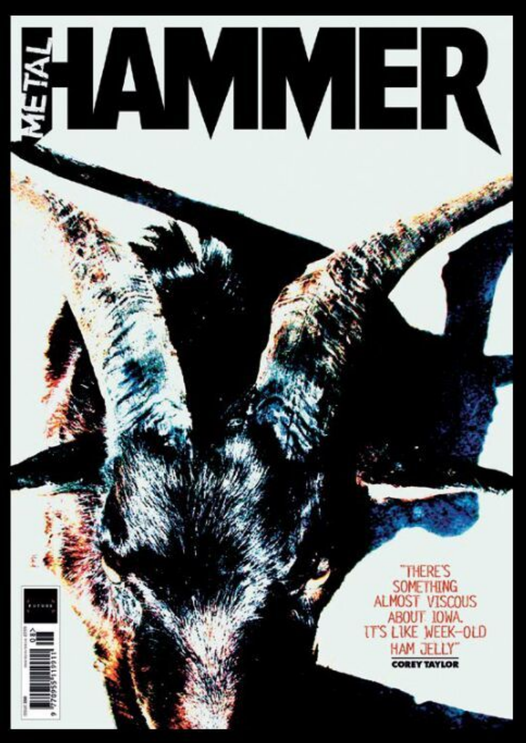

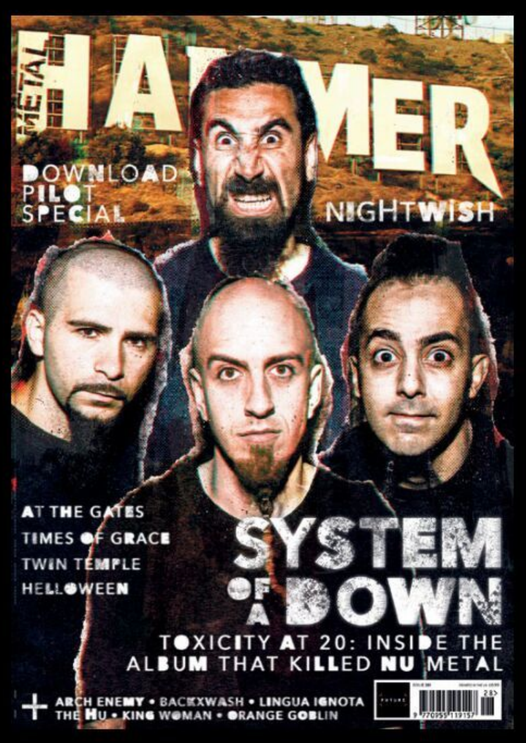

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GETTY

Judas Priest ARE 50

…and somehow, inexplicably, they're still as determined to defend the faith as ever. Last October, we caught up with the legends to find out what keeps them going in such uncertain times.

WORDS: JOE DALY • PICTURES: TRAVIS SHINN

JUDAS PRIEST

K.K Downing (second from left) played with Priest from 1970-2011

The afternoon has hardly begun and the US National Weather Service has already issued an 'Excessive Heat Warning' for the greater Phoenix area. As the thermostat approaches 45°C, news outlets caution locals to remain indoors or risk terminal heat stroke. It's quite metal, actually, and it's where we find Rob Halford today, comfortably ensconced in his air-conditioned home. The legendary Judas Priest vocalist and long-time Phoenix resident turned 69 yesterday and he is still basking in the online birthday wishes. "It's just absolutely overwhelming emotionally to see so much love coming back from every possible place," he tells *Metal Hammer*, "particularly on social media, like Instagram and Facebook. I spent quite a bit of time yesterday reading the beautiful comments and things that people were saying about Priest and the metal we make."

In its wild and colourful history, metal culture has suffered no shortage of legends, but only Rob Halford is known as the Metal God. Exceedingly friendly, he calls us by our first name throughout the interview and shares his insights with a thoughtful intensity. Rob's autobiography, *Confess*, will soon be released and Judas Priest are celebrating their 50th anniversary, putting him in a reflective mood. "It's a really powerful moment to read these beautiful comments," he says, "because it all pertains to the chat that we're going to have today about how metal is so immersed in the lives of so many metal maniacs around the world. Particularly, in this instance, with Judas Priest."

We are indeed here to talk about one of the most important bands in metal history and all that they have accomplished, inspired, overcome and conquered in over a half-century. But talking about Judas Priest's influence on heavy metal is like talking about the round part of a football. Metal, as we know it today, could hardly exist in any recognisable form without the steely-eyed quintet who emerged from the Midlands at the dawn of the 70s. Originally formed in 1969, Priest experienced a spate of line-up changes before congealing in 1973 around the core of Rob on vocals, guitarist Ken 'K.K.' Downing and bassist Ian Hill. In 1974, at the suggestion of their then-label, a virtuosic young shredder named Glenn Tipton joined the band as a second guitarist. Several different men would helm the Judas Priest drum stool for the first two decades, until the mighty Scott Travis ascended the throne in 1989.

Checking in from his home in the UK, Glenn remembers seeing Judas Priest for the first time. "Seeing the band and hearing Rob's vocal abilities… it was truly magical," he says. "He has such a distinct voice. I had great belief in both the band and Rob."

If Rob Halford is the Metal God, then Glenn Tipton is Priest's Lord of the Metal Riff. Any talented, hardworking guitarist might be chuffed to be known for writing one or two memorable riffs, but through the decades Glenn has composed literally scores of world-famous, stadium-shaking bangers. In 2018, Glenn stepped away from touring duties after disclosing a diagnosis of later-stage Parkinson's disease. Passionate and completely unguarded, Glenn tells us that despite his health challenges, he's hanging tough. "I have good days and bad days," he says, "so I just get on with it. I'm very positive some days, but others quite negative, so I just try and make every day count and enjoy myself."

"I HAVE GOOD DAYS AND BAD DAYS"

GLENN TIPTON

In their earliest years, through their 1974 debut, *Rocka Rolla*, Priest aligned more with the prog rock and electric blues outfits of the day – bands like Cream, the Yardbirds, Hendrix and early Zeppelin. In these styles, they saw possibilities as yet unexplored and they seized the moment. "We've always felt that Judas Priest was born at the right time," Rob says. "We had this wonderful opportunity to be inspired by such incredible musicians and to make something unique together in those early stages."

Aside from some superficial commonalities, Judas Priest really sound like *none* of those early bands, even including Black Sabbath. Behind hard-driving tempos, and the fiercely affecting spectacle of two metal shredders and a frontman who seemed to channel his vocals from the very heavens above, they knew they had

PRESS

conjured something both darkly powerful and hopelessly catchy. It was Judas Priest who first alchemised those early influences into a punishing new style of music that the world would soon recognise as a new strain of heavy metal. They hit the road as soon as possible. "We were laying the groundwork with all of those countless trips up and down the British motorways and across the ferries to Europe before we ever set foot in America," says Rob.

Back in the UK, bassist Ian Hill takes a break from tinkering around on his Bentley to chat. Ian laughs loudly and often and stresses that in those early days, nothing came easy. "It was hard work, you know? Some of the days we'd go to Norway in February! You'd put your gear in the back of the van and you'd put your mattresses on top of the gear and you'd sleep on that. Sometimes we weren't even sure we had the petrol money to get home. Ha ha ha! It was all so exciting, it really was. We loved every minute of it."

Today most bands release a new album every few years. Now consider that, beginning with *Rocka Rolla*, Priest released 12 full-length albums in 16 years. "I don't know how we did it," Rob says, "it's mad! We'd be on the road for a year, take a week's break and go back in the studio and make another album."

"On albums back when we first started," Ian explains, "I think we had a total of 24 tracks, so they didn't take a great deal of time."

Steadily and progressively, Judas Priest evolved their sound from *Sad Wings Of Destiny* (1976) to the 1980 masterpiece known as *British Steel*. Each album featured higher musicianship, ambition and attitude. Rob says, "I think the mindset for every Priest album is, 'What can we do that's different from the last record?'"

On *Sad Wings Of Destiny*, Judas Priest introduced the world to the fearsome spectacle of its double-fretted attack. Glenn and K.K. played at a dizzying pace, weaving deeply intricate melodies together, building towards climaxes so powerful as to render sold-out stadiums breathless, hoarse and begging for more. "The dual guitars are pretty unique," Glenn says. "There were bands like Wishbone Ash who had dual guitars, but we had two *heavy metal* guitarists harmonising and producing an exciting stereo backdrop of sound." Glenn and K.K. had set a new standard for heavy music that would figure prominently in a few years, with the rise of Iron Maiden and the NWOBHM.

In 1980, behind the dramatic potency of tracks like *Breaking The Law*, *Living After Midnight* and *Rapid Fire*, the masterpiece known as *British Steel* broke Priest in the US, where they entered the Top 40 and never looked back. "We wrote and recorded *British Steel* in about four weeks," Glenn recalls. "We wrote half of it in the studio; some great songs like *The Rage*, that just came naturally to us. Sometimes the best things come when you do them quickly..."

Rob adds, "I think we started to get really excited about where we were at by the time that we released the *British Steel* album. That was a tipping point for us, to some extent."

If *British Steel* established them as the pre-eminent metal band of their generation, their release two years later would catapult them into the mainstream. "The first time we got very successful was probably *Screaming For Vengeance*," Ian says, "when AM radio picked up on *You've Got Another Thing Coming*. That made us an 'overnight success', ha ha ha! We were on a long, steady climb until that point and then we sort of took off there."

Fast-forward to the present and they've sold more than 50 million albums, toured Planet Earth countless times, released 18 full-lengths and scored a Grammy; but to a man, they insist that they've never rested on these laurels. "Because of who we are and where we're from," Rob says, "we never looked each other in the eye and gave two thumbs up and said we've made it."

Glenn agrees, saying, "I suppose that we never really accepted the accolade of how big we'd become. We've always kept our feet on the ground and we just give the best show we can every time we take the stage."

At the same time, they are all keenly aware of the towering scale of their legacy. Says Rob, "There is no other band like Priest, and I don't say that from a pedestal. It's a fact."

There have been offstage moments that have played a prominent role in the band's history. From a very young age, Rob had known and accepted that he was gay, but until coming out in 1998, his

Richie Faulkner: Priest's wunderkind

sexuality was never publicised. Within the band however, it was never an issue. Ian explains: "He was Rob. It wouldn't have mattered if he was gay or straight or whatever. It didn't change anything."

"My main focus was my band, Judas Priest and heavy metal," adds Rob. "But in the early days, [my sexuality] was tucked away deeply in the closet and those few that did know kept it as quiet as I did."

In 1985, two young Nevada men carried out a suicide pact after a day of reportedly drinking, smoking marijuana and listening to Judas Priest albums. Their families sued the band, claiming that Judas Priest had encouraged fans to take their own lives by inserting secret backwards messages on *Stained Glass*, like "Let's be dead" and "Do it." The band had, of course, done no such thing and the case was dismissed, but not before Judas Priest were dragged through a gauntlet of vilification in the American media. Ian recalls, "We never expected it to go to court. But within a week I think the judge realised he'd made a terrible mistake by letting it get into court to start with."

Revitalised and renewed, the band entered the 90s with *Painkiller*, a marauding siege of modern metal that pumped the full-throttle aggression of thrash into their trademark sound. It was not simply one of their finest moments; it was a statement. "Out of all of the albums that we've made, that one had a definite kind of agenda, if that's the right word," explains Rob. "We wanted it to be relentless, which is what that record is, from the first track to the last."

Painkiller featured the debut of drummer Scott Travis, whose punishing double-kick assault and hyperkinetic volleys propelled Priest into a new era. "That was a revelation when he came along," says Ian. "[The previous drummer,] Dave Holland was a great technical drummer but he couldn't handle the stuff that Scott does. No way, God bless him. Scott opened a whole new avenue for us, really."

Now 30 years into his tenure, Scott tells us, "I now understand the gravity of Judas Priest, which is a legendary band, and that only comes with time. It takes that much time to become, dare I say, a legendary band, because that's what Priest is. Sometimes I look at them like I'm not even in the band, like, 'Wow, that's Judas Priest! They're legendary!' Ha ha!"

Rob Halford: the Metal God, and you know it

"I WAS TUCKED AWAY DEEPLY IN THE CLOSET"

ROB HALFORD

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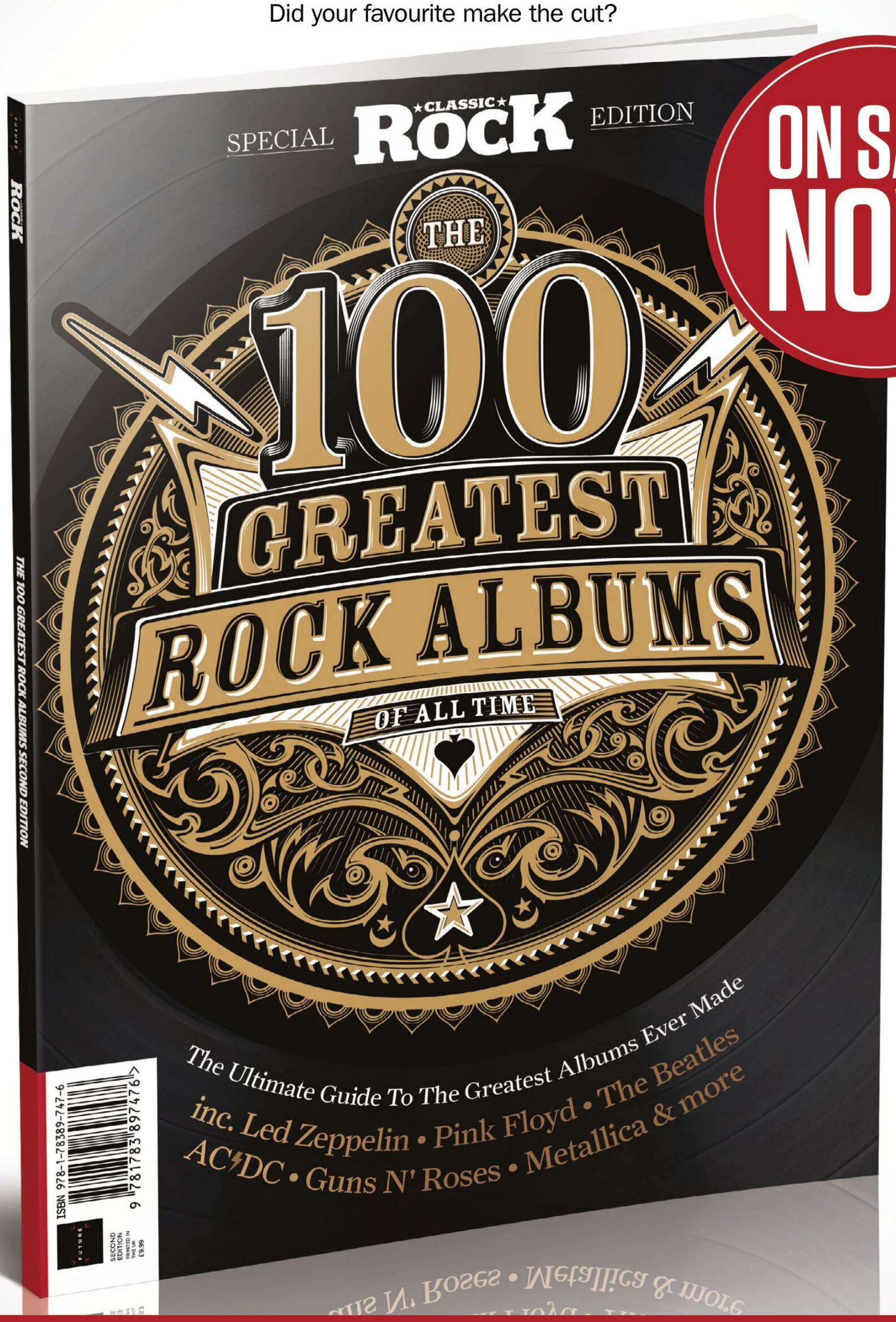

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Born in Virginia, where we find him today, the chilled-out and amiable drummer is the only non-English member of the band – a detail that did not escape him when he joined. "Not only was I an American," he says, "but I was at least 10 years younger than them. It could have gone completely pear-shaped, as they say in the UK. There were no personality clashes – none of that. I guess there was a little bit of risk on their part but here we are, 30 years later."

Then in 1992, Rob stunned the global metal community by leaving the band to pursue new projects. Three years later, Priest recruited US vocalist Tim 'Ripper' Owens from a Judas Priest tribute band. They released two albums with Ripper – *Jugulator* and *Demolition* – before Rob returned in 2003. "Tim is a brilliant vocalist," says Ian. "He really is. But he wasn't Rob and I think that's the problem that everybody had with it – including Tim. When Rob said he wanted to come back and rejoin, Tim was all for it because he could see it."

Glenn looks back on the Ripper years "with fondness," saying, "Tim is a good lad. We had some great live tours and we had some fun together."'

Rob's 2003 return to the band led to a trio of studio campaigns – *Angel Of Retribution*, *Nostradamus* and *Redeemer Of Souls*. It was during this period, in 2011, that K.K. retired from Judas Priest, citing myriad grievances with the band and its management. British wunderkind Richie Faulkner was brought in as K.K.'s replacement and he's made an immediate impact on both the band's songwriting and their live show.

Richie is energetic, affable and possessed of a bone-dry British humour. In July, he and his partner Mariah welcomed their first child, their daughter Daisy Mae, which has kept him rather busy and exceedingly happy. Upon joining Priest, Richie felt the love straight away. "It was an immediate sense of inclusion and respect and family. I got an opportunity with one of the world's best

Ian Hill: from a mattress in the back of a van to a Bentley owner. Good going!

Godless: the guys with Tim 'Ripper' Owens, second from right

bands, in my opinion, so if they'd told me to turn up, play the parts and fuck off, I would have been fine. But they didn't. It was, 'What do you think?,' 'What's your opinion?', 'What would you do here?', 'How can we change this?' When they give you 1,000%, you give 10,000% back."

On 2018's *Firepower*, the band notched another high with their most consistent and catchiest batch of new material since *Painkiller*, again flaunting their ability to modernise while carrying forward that inimitable Priest DNA.

Despite years of globetrotting, according to Richie, Judas Priest remain close to their British roots. "We're all moany old women, to some degree! Ha ha ha," he laughs. "We are all stereotypically English. We like a dark pub with low ceilings and no light and shit food, do you know what I mean?"

Like Black Sabbath and a handful of other metal bands, Judas Priest have transcended their metal fame and claimed a spot in mainstream culture. There was of course, the movie *Rock Star*, a fictional tale loosely inspired by Rob's departure from the band, starring Mark Wahlberg in the Ripper role. They also made a well-known cameo on *The Simpsons*, but the quirkiest moment might well be the cult documentary *Heavy Metal Parking Lot*, featuring literally a parking lot full of Judas Priest fans swilling beer and getting pumped for a Priest show. "I think *Heavy Metal Parking Lot* sums it up, really," says Glenn. "Some of our fans are animals and they love metal! We have really loyal fans!"

"The people like to live a little bit more on the wild side, if you know what I mean," says Ian. "Not the people you would generally find at Yale or Harvard. Ha ha ha!"

Fans will soon have a new reason to celebrate. The band report that even prior to the COVID lockdown, they had begun work on a new album. "We started the year prepping the next Judas Priest metal masterpiece," Rob says, "and we had one massive writing session together and we've got an enormous amount of material stacked up, which is really thrilling after the glorious response we had to *Firepower*."

"It's gonna be good," Scott says. "Rob's always excited about new music, which is great, because he's such a creative guy and when you are that creative, naturally you never rest on your laurels. You always want to do something new and get it out there."

"WE WEREN'T EVEN SURE WE HAD THE MONEY TO GET HOME"

IAN HILL

GETTY

Scott Travis: still coming to terms with the fact he's in a legendary band

Though delayed by COVID, the process remains the same. "We compile all our ideas and get together and throw them in the pot and see what sticks," explains Richie, "then see what lights up the room, see what Rob grabs hold of; it might be a riff that Rob really gets his teeth into that inspires a lyric or an intro, verse or chorus and suddenly you've got the nucleus of a song."

Fans will be thrilled to learn that Glenn remains as deeply immersed in the process as ever. "Parkinson's is a degenerative disease," Richie says, "so it gets steadily worse and you have to keep taking medication to keep it at bay. But the great thing with Glenn is that we've still got his mind. His mind's still sharp and his ideas are still sharp. I'll tell you what, man, I might have a riff or a part or a section and I don't know what it is, but it lacks something. Glenn will say, 'Try this' and I'll think, 'That's not gonna work. You're out of your mind…' and then I'll try it and see that it's the exact turnaround or riff or part that it needed to make it Judas Priest. So if he's having a tough day on guitar one day, he's still in there with us, coming up with ideas – almost like a producer role. And he's on some of the tracks so far already. But if he's having a bad day with the guitar, he can just throw out his ideas and honestly, that's what makes the difference sometimes." Andy Sneap, the British-born guitarist and studio guru who co-produced *Firepower*, has been tapped to fill in for Glenn on upcoming live performances.

As so many of their peers have retired, passed on or faded onto the heritage circuit, it's inspiring to hear the genuine excitement among the guys to write new material and to get it out to the fans. "If I'm not greatly mistaken," Rob says, "Priest is the longest-working heavy metal band out there – from 1969 to 2020. It's remarkable, it really is."

Whatever happens from here, Priest will be remembered long into the future for many reasons. Considering how he'd like history to view his band, Glenn is comfortingly to the point. "A legacy of true heavy metal," he offers, noting that he hopes it's a legacy that'll "inspire the shape of metal to come."

"It's a simple statement: 'Judas Priest, Defenders of the Faith,'" adds Rob. "Because that's what we've been doing in our lives in metal for all these years. Flying the flag of heavy metal for 50 years, with more to come."

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Glenn Tipton: still a vital part of the Priest family

"WE NEVER ACCEPTED HOW BIG WE'D BECOME"

GLENN TIPTON

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EDDIE VAN HALEN

“IT WAS LIKE HE CAME FROM ANOTHER PLANET”

From blowing Sabbath offstage with his band to influencing everyone from Dimebag to Adam D with his playing, Eddie Van Halen’s impact on the metal world was unlike any other. In November, we celebrated the life of a true legend, with a little help from his friends and peers

WORDS: PAUL BRANNIGAN

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EDDIE VAN HALEN

Rock'n'roll didn't know what had hit it when Van Halen burst onto the scene

The godfathers of heavy metal were starting to feel their age. 1978 was supposed to be a year of celebration for Black Sabbath – their 10th anniversary – but in reality, the group was falling apart. "The fun of being in a rock band was dwindling for me," Ozzy Osbourne later admitted. "I don't think anyone's heart was in it anymore." Ozzy had actually taken a leave of absence from Sabbath in autumn '77, officially to spend time with his father Jack, who was dying of cancer. When *NME* interviewed the singer in November '77, he seemed in no mood to return to the unit – "I just want a simple life for a while," he insisted – and when Sabbath performed *War Pigs* and *Junior's Eyes* on BBC TV's *Look! Hear!* programme in January 1978, former Fleetwood Mac frontman Dave Walker was tasked with lip-syncing Ozzy's vocals. So it was something of a surprise when the singer returned to the fold ahead of the Birmingham band's departure to Toronto to record their eighth studio album, *Never Say Die!* Though old tensions occasionally surfaced during fraught studio sessions – "we were all fucked-up with drugs and alcohol," Ozzy recalled – all four musicians were excited about the prospect of returning to the UK for their 10th anniversary tour in May. Sabbath had taken AC/DC out as support on their last run of European gigs, and had struggled to match the livewire Aussies for energy, so Ozzy instructed Sabbath's booking agency to find "a bar band from LA" to open the show each night on their homecoming dates. As luck would have it, their US label, Warners, had just such an act on their books.

The name Van Halen meant nothing to the members of Sabbath, so, out of curiosity, ahead of their scheduled stage time on the tour's opening night at Sheffield City Hall on May 16, Ozzy and his bandmates Tony Iommi, Geezer Butler and Bill Ward, shuffled out of their dressing room to catch the end of the Californian band's set. They arrived side-stage just as the group's guitarist, 23-year-old Eddie Van Halen, launched into the second track of his band's recently released self-titled album.

Eruption wasn't originally on the list of songs Van Halen had pencilled in to appear on their debut album. Producer Ted Templeman had popped out of the control booth at Sunset Sound Recorders to grab a coffee when he first heard Eddie Van Halen playing the 102-second instrumental between takes. "What's that?" Ted asked. "Ah, nothing," came the reply. "It's just something I warm up on."

"Let's hear it again," the producer said. "We gotta record it. Right away."

Eddie Van Halen had been finessing his solo showcase onstage in Hollywood clubs for the best part of three years. As often as not, he would perform the classically inspired instrumental with his back to the audience, so that no one could see exactly what he was doing. The secret technique the guitarist was shielding involved using both his hands on the fretboard to tap out notes at light-speed. Van Halen would later claim that he hit upon the idea while watching Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page play the solo from *Heartbreaker* one-handed during a show at The Forum in Inglewood, California in August 1971: "It's like having a sixth finger on your left hand," he told *Guitar World*. "Instead of picking, you're hitting a note on the fretboard. Nobody was really doing more than just one stretch and one note real quick. So I started dicking around…"

Van Halen never claimed to have invented the two-handed tapping technique, but watching him perform *Eruption* up close before slamming into his group's swaggering update of The Kinks' *You Really Got Me* left the members of Black Sabbath in slack-jawed awe as they trooped back to their dressing room.

"We sat there going, 'That was incredible…'," Ozzy recalled, "and then it finished, and we were just too stunned to speak."

"I didn't know very much about Van Halen at all," admits Tony Iommi, "but when I first heard them it was like, 'Bloody hell!' They were so energetic, they were great players, they had good songs and we were just like, 'Wow, blimey, these are really good!'"

When the tour reached London, Iommi collared his good friend, Brian May from Queen, to join him side-stage at the Hammersmith Odeon to watch the hot-shot Californian at play.

"The pair of us watched Eddie Van Halen do his stuff, and it was just glorious," recalled Brian, "almost too glorious to take in. To see this guy romping around a guitar like a kitten, just running and taking it to places undreamed of… There hadn't been anything so shocking since Hendrix."

"The place was packed for Van Halen," recalls *Metal Hammer* writer Malcolm Dome, then a journalist for weekly music magazine *Sounds*. "Everyone wanted to see them because they'd already got a real buzz around them from the metal cognoscenti, the people who regularly bought rock records on import. They were definitely better than Sabbath that night; they were so exciting, vibrant

and so new, and they made Sabbath look old. They sounded like the future."

From an early age, Eddie Van Halen was acutely aware of music's capacity to captivate, charm and bedazzle. As a small child, Eddie would sit enrapt while his father Jan, a professional musician who performed with distinction in jazz bands and orchestras, practised clarinet in the family home in Nijmegen, Holland. On occasion, when his Indonesian-born mother Eugenia was required to work night shifts, Eddie and his older brother, Alex, would be packed off to Jan's musical engagements, their mother hoping that their presence might inhibit their bohemian father's predilection for extensive post-gig drinking. In reality, it did nothing of the sort, merely strengthening the duo's impression of the music scene as a free-spirited utopia. When Edward was five and Alex six, Eugenia enrolled the children in piano lessons with a Russian concert pianist who lived locally. "If you're going to follow in your dad's footsteps," she warned the pair, "it better be respectable."

In March 1962, the Van Halens left their apartment at Rozemarijnstraat 59 and set off to board an ocean liner bound for America. Letters from relatives in California had fired

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Zakk Wylde and Eddie Van Halen toasting Dimebag Darrell at his public memorial service on December 14, 2004

Eugenia's dreams of a fresh start for the family. The new immigrants arrived in Pasadena later that month, and took up residence in a modest three-bedroom, single-bathroom apartment they were to share with two other families.

"When we finally arrived in Pasadena, it was rough," Eddie told an audience at Washington DC's National Museum of American History, during a February 2015 talk convened as part of the Smithsonian's What It Means To Be American series. "We lived in one room, slept in one bed. My father had to walk three miles to go wash dishes [at the Arcadia Methodist Hospital], he was a janitor at the Masonic Temple, at Pacific Telephone, my mom was a maid… We used to go dumpster-diving for scrap metal, then go to the scrap yard and sell the metal we found."

"We were two outcasts that didn't speak the language and didn't know what was going on," he said, referring to Alex and himself. "So we became best friends and learned to stick together."

Music would serve as an escapist outlet for the brothers. The success of The Beatles prompted a 'British Invasion' of the American 'hit parade' in the mid 1960s, and having been charmed by the smooth melodies of London's The Dave Clark Five, the Van Halen boys formed their first band, The Broken Combs, with Eddie on piano and Alex on saxophone. In time, Eddie switched to learning drums, while Alex began playing guitar, but they would soon swap instruments. "He could play [The Surfaris' 1963 instrumental hit] *Wipeout* and I couldn't," Eddie later recalled. "I said, 'OK, fuck you. I'll play your guitar.' Forget the piano, I don't want to sit down – I want to stand up and be crazy."

"My brother would go out at 7pm to party and get laid, and when he'd come back at 3am, I would be sitting in the same place, playing guitar. I did that for years."

In 1971, the Van Halen brothers and fellow teenager Mark Stone formed a power trio named Genesis. With Eddie on vocals and guitar, Alex on drums and Mark on bass, the trio played note-for-note versions of songs by Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin and Cream. Upon discovering that a rather better-known rock band named Genesis existed in England, the Pasadena trio became Mammoth. In 1974, somewhat reluctantly, they recruited cocksure, Indiana-born vocalist David Lee Roth, formerly with their local rivals Red Ball Jet, to front the band. The Van Halen brothers were more than a little wary of the flamboyant, peacocking, motormouth singer – "Ed and I couldn't stand the motherfucker," Alex once bluntly admitted – but David had his

"I DIDN'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT VAN HALEN. WHEN I HEARD THEM… BLOODY HELL"

TONY IOMMI

own PA, enough confidence to power the national grid, and a devoted following among Pasadena's female high school population, so a marriage of convenience was struck. When Mark Stone was replaced by Chicago-born Michael Anthony Sobolewski, who would later drop his Polish surname, it was David who suggested they rebrand as Van Halen, and supercharge their live sets with more accessible, less technical songs to seduce club audiences. "It's very impressive," he said of the group's old repertoire, "but you can't dance to it." The new Van Halen mission statement, David insisted, would be to make every day seem like a Saturday night. In came hits by Aerosmith, ZZ Top, James Brown, David Bowie, Bad Company, Kiss and Queen. The revamped group quickly carved out a reputation as the area's hottest good-time band, drawing hundreds of teenagers to their riotous backyard gigs… until, inevitably, cops descended to break up the party. While David had a quick wit, a big mouth, pretty boy looks and a complete lack of shame, it was the shy, permanently smiling guitarist by his side who was the group's true star, as their peers quickly realised.

"Eddie was pretty special," recalls Mark Kendall, who later found fame as the guitarist of LA rockers Great White. "I'd look into the crowd and I could see the guitar player from every band I knew watching him. Eddie was the man, the king, it was unquestioned."

"We were jealous, and we were all trying to play catch-up," recalls future Dokken guitarist George Lynch, then playing in LA-area band The Boyz. "We thought, 'Oh boy… this guy's going to change the world.'"

Word of the band's snowballing popularity soon reached LA-based manager Catherine Hitchen, a vivacious Londoner who looked after local acts such as Yankee Rose and Sorcery. Always keen to make useful contacts, David Lee Roth invited Catherine to check out the band at a party at his doctor father's house.

"When we got to the house, which was in a ritzy area of Pasadena, there were cars parked everywhere, and we had to park quite a way away, and walk over in our platform shoes," the now Catherine Harris recalls. "We could hear the music from streets away, and when we got into the party it was crazy, absolutely crazy. The first thing that hit me was Edward. He was unbelievable. He was playing with his fingers over the frets, which nobody did then, and I was absolutely blown away. My friend and I looked at each other and I said, 'Oh. My. Goodness. This kid is a virtuoso.' They were just another rock band until Edward cut loose. David was brilliant onstage, but it was Edward who really grabbed us. So I started booking them shows in Hollywood."

David Lee Roth and Eddie Van Halen: a marriage of convenience

"THAT FIRST VAN HALEN RECORD SIGNALLED THE END OF ROCK AS WE KNEW IT"

SLASH

For all Eddie's ability, it was actually George Lynch's blossoming reputation as a guitar player that led Kiss duo Paul Stanley and Gene Simmons to see the Pasadena band in West Hollywood club the Starwood one evening in 1976. By now Van Halen originals – showcasing a sound they called Big Rock – were eclipsing the cover songs in their high-energy sets.

"I had gone to the Starwood the night before with Lita Ford and seen Van Halen and The Boyz," recalls Stanley. "I remember The Boyz covering *Detroit Rock City* and I was thinking, 'Boy, this a great song'… and then realised it was mine! But Van Halen were just a powerhouse – Eddie was something completely different, and Dave was on his way to becoming the ultimate frontman."

On the evening of February 2, Ted Templeman watched Van Halen perform in front of a subdued Starwood crowd. Formerly a member of 'sunshine pop' band Harpers Bizarre, Ted was now a hotshot producer (having worked with Van Morrison, Little Feat and Californian hard rock band Montrose) and A&R executive at Warner Bros. He returned to the club on the following night with company chairman Mo Ostin in tow, and insisted, successfully, that Warners sign the band on the spot.

"When Van Halen came onstage it was like they were shot out of a cannon… they performed like they were playing an arena, and not a small Hollywood club," Ted recalled in his autobiography *A Platinum Producer's Life In Music*. "Right out of the gate, I was just knocked out by Ed Van Halen. It's weird to say this, but encountering him was almost like falling head-over-heels with a girl on a first date. I was so dazzled. I had never been as impressed with a musician as I was with him that night. When I think back on that night, it wasn't just one thing about him that grabbed me. It was his whole persona. This guy, when he played,

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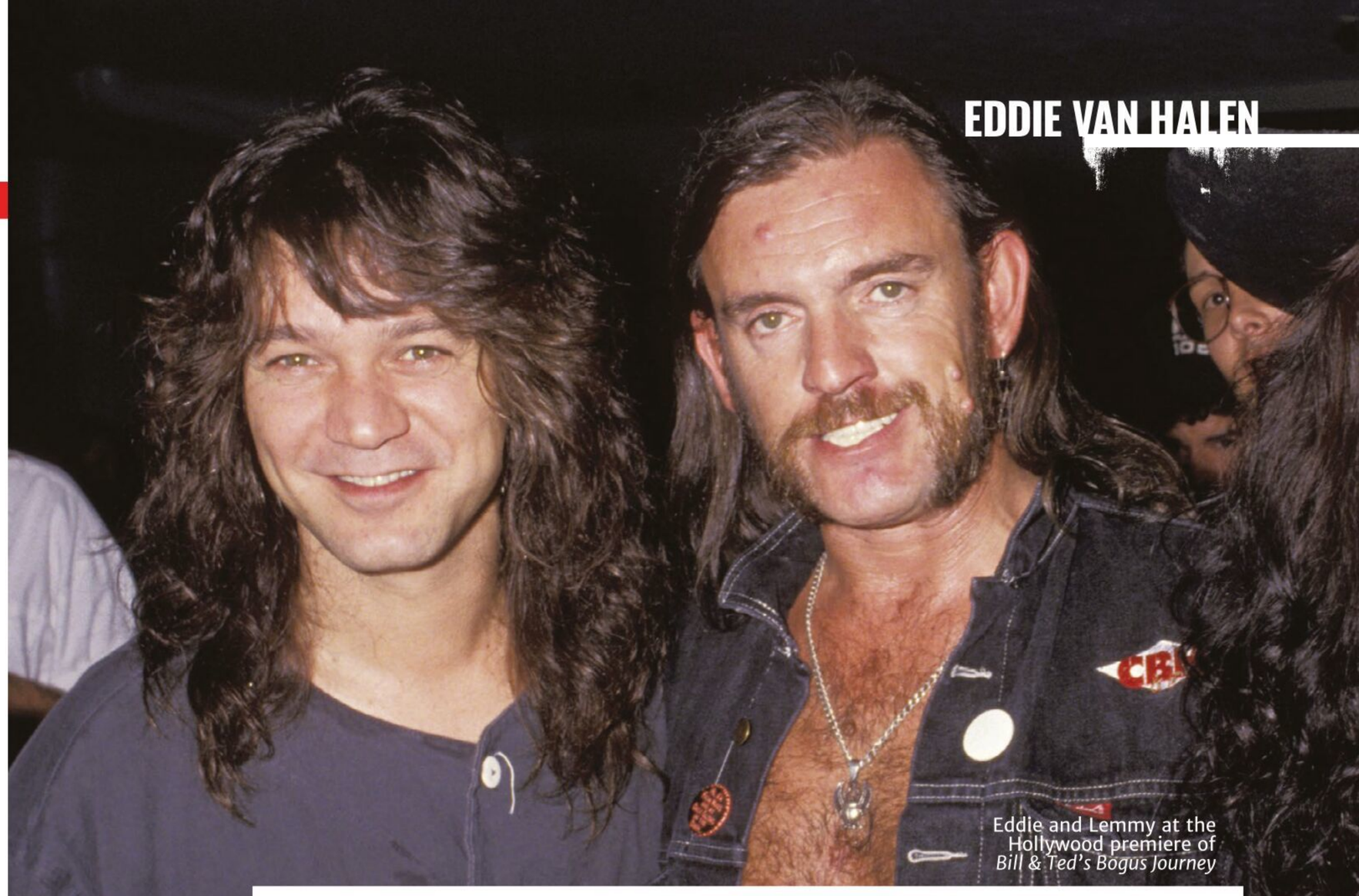
looked completely natural and unaffected; he was so nonchalant in his greatness. Here he was, playing the most incredible shit, acting as if it were no more challenging than snapping his fingers."

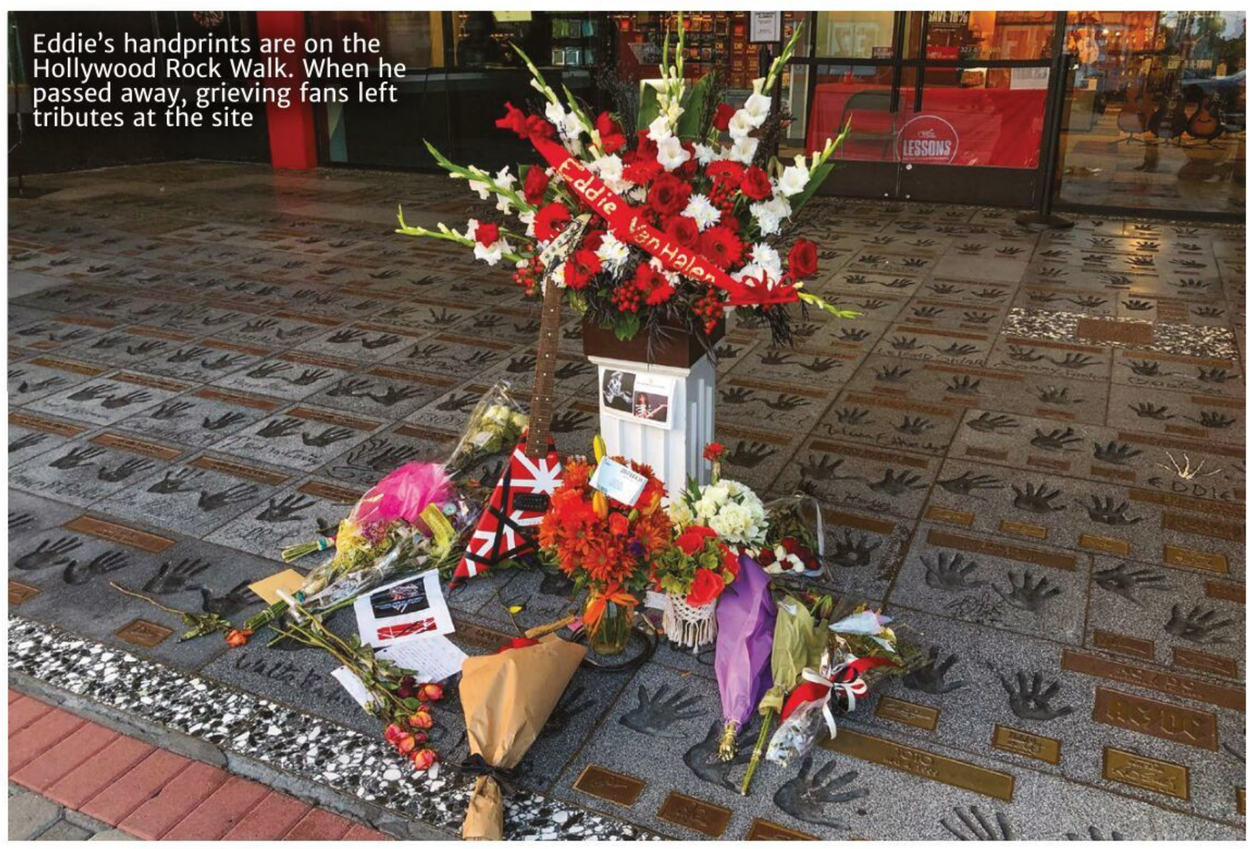
Ted immediately booked the quartet into Hollywood's Sunset Sound studios. The Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin and The Doors had all used the facility in the past, and Van Halen's demo sessions would prove to be a breeze, with the quartet recording live, rolling through 25 songs in a matter of hours. Though the perfectionist Van Halen brothers had some misgivings about the results of the hastily arranged session – "We popped it [the demo cassette] into the player in my van and expected to hear Led Zeppelin coming out," Eddie later confessed, "but we were kind of appalled by what we heard. It just didn't sound the way we wanted it to sound" – they were not about to question Ted's authority. At the end of August, the group returned to the studio with Ted to cut their debut album.

Put simply, that album, unfussily titled *Van Halen*, is one of the greatest hard rock albums in history. From the pounding Michael Anthony bassline that introduces *Runnin' With The Devil* via the dazzling *Eruption* and the punchy cover of *You Really Got Me* (Ted Templeman's banker for ensuring that Van Halen, unlike his former charges Montrose, would secure a hit single) through to the effervescent *Ain't Talkin' 'Bout Love* – a song Eddie wrote as a joke to take the piss out of punk rock – the irresistible, harmony-drenched *I'm The One* and *Feel Your Love Tonight*, and on to DLR's long-time party piece, bluesman John Brim's raunchy *Ice Cream Man*, and aptly titled rocker *On Fire*, the album is the purest distillation of hedonistic, liberated, sun-kissed Californian rock music ever committed to tape. It's fast cars, endless nights and loose morals, cheerleaders, cheeseburgers and cocaine, Daisy Dukes and bikini tops, breaking surf and teenage rebellion, with every trace of self-doubt and self-restraint eradicated. Just as The Beach Boys supplied the soundtrack to American adolescence in the 1960s, and the Eagles owned the 70s, with their stunning debut Van Halen boldly declared that the 80s would be their playground. And if David Lee Roth sold a new generation a brand new American dream, it was Eddie Van Halen's jaw-dropping virtuosity that made the album truly sing, his sweet, outrageously playful, seemingly effortless and utterly electrifying playing lighting up the sky. From the moment the needle dropped upon the

WITH LEMMY: GETTY.



Eddie and Lemmy at the Hollywood premiere of *Bill & Ted's Bogus Journey*



Eddie's handprints are on the Hollywood Rock Walk. When he passed away, grieving fans left tributes at the site

Van Halen album on stereos worldwide, every bedroom guitarist had a new gold standard to aspire to.

"Edward has a sense of adventure," David Lee Roth declared, neatly encapsulating the guitarist's mindset. "He will dive headfirst. We'll see if there's water in the pool later."

"I can remember the specific place where I first heard Eddie Van Halen," said Guns N' Roses guitarist Slash in 2010. "I was at this elementary school

"EDDIE WAS TO OUR GENERATION WHAT HENDRIX WAS TO HIS"

DIMEBAG DARRELL

that we used to break into after school was over, and we used to skate and race bikes in there. [Future GN'R drummer] Steve Adler, who had just become my best friend around that time said, 'Hey, check this out…' and he had one of these little Panasonic cassette players and he played me *Eruption* into *You Really Got Me*, and it was just like… Wow. Besides the guitar pyrotechnics, the overall vibe of Van Halen was very energetic, and very new-sounding, very fresh-sounding. It had a ton of attitude, it was just in-your-face.

"As soon as that record came out… it was 1978 so I was 13, and I hadn't picked up the guitar yet… that signalled the end of rock as we knew it. Everything that had happened up to that point all sorta changed."

"Mark my words," wrote *Rolling Stone* magazine's Charles M Young in his review of the album, "in three years, Van Halen is going to be fat and self-indulgent and disgusting, and they'll follow Deep Purple and Led Zeppelin right into the toilet. In the meantime, they are likely to be a big deal… Edward Van Halen has mastered the art of lead/rhythm guitar in the tradition of Jimmy Page and Joe Walsh; several riffs on this record beat anything Aerosmith has come up with in years."

When the album came out, the quartet hit the ground running,

mixing headline dates in Japan and continental Europe with support shows and festival appearances. When they rejoined Sabbath's Never Say Die! tour in America, the promoters should really have hired a crime scene investigator to draw chalk outlines around Ozzy, Tony, Geezer and Bill onstage every night – Sabbath were being absolutely murdered.

Back in Los Angeles in the first week of December '78, their first world tour completed, the band received an invitation to a party from their record label. Warners wanted to present the quartet with platinum discs, as their debut album had now racked up sales of two million copies in the US alone. Held at the Body Shop on Sunset Boulevard, LA's only all-nude strip joint, the shindig was a suitably raucous affair. The next day, however, Van Halen were back in Sunset Sound with Ted Templeman, working on album number two.

With each successive release – *Van Halen II* (1979), *Women And Children First* (1980), *Fair Warning* (1981), *Diver Down* (1982) – Van Halen grew in confidence and stature, assuming the mantle of America's Greatest Guitar Band. In 1983, the quartet entered the *Guinness Book Of Records* after securing the highest-ever fee for a single performance, when Apple Computers co-founder Steve Wozniak paid them $1.5 million to headline the 'Heavy Metal Day' of the 1983 US festival above Ozzy, Judas Priest, Scorpions and Mötley Crüe. "It was the day new wave died," said Crüe frontman Vince Neil, "and rock'n'roll took over." Though Eddie somewhat dismissed the idea of Van Halen being labelled a heavy metal band – "to me, heavy metal is just rock'n'roll. It's a feeling put out at a high volume" – his influence upon three subsequent generations of metal musicians is inarguable. In his free-flowing, uninhibited, boundary-flouting playing, other musicians heard the sound of liberation – and his influence would be heard in the playing of everyone from Dimebag Darrell to Killswitch Engage's Adam D.

"He was to our generation what Hendrix was to his," superfan Dimebag commented. "He plays *Eruption* and you go, 'Shit, I never heard a guitar sound like that in my life!'"

"In the guitar hierarchy, where Jimi Hendrix is God, Eddie was Jesus Christ, the Second Coming," says Zakk Wylde, who joined Eddie onstage at Dimebag's funeral in 2004 to toast the former Pantera guitarist. "Ed broke through less than 10 years after Jimi passed, but he sounded like the

Eddie and his beloved, unmistakable Frankenstrat

new age. It was like he came from another planet."

With Van Halen's profile raised immeasurably by the national television coverage given to their appearance at the US festival, the quartet's 1984 album yielded their first US No.1 single, *Jump*, and took up a five-week residency at No.2 on the Billboard charts; it would go on to become Van Halen's second 10 million-selling album. Ironically, the album that kept it from the top spot was Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, which featured the on-loan guitar skills of a certain moonlighting Dutch-born guitarist on hit single *Beat It*.

Even the wildest parties must one day wind down, and the first cracks in the VH world came with the exit of David Lee Roth in 1985. Emboldened by the success of his debut solo EP, *Crazy From The Heat*, David branded the guitarist a "dictator" as he departed. "Nobody cares about Van Halen without David Lee Roth," he sneered.

Labelling David a "clown", Eddie Van Halen responded in the most cutting terms.

"The problem with Roth was that he forgot who wrote the songs," he noted. "I wrote them. And the songs are the heart of our music. I never listened to his words. I couldn't have cared less what he was singing about."

Van Halen promptly recruited former Montrose vocalist Sammy Hagar to front the band, and the new-look quartet scored Van Halen's first American No.1 album with 1986's *5150*. Three consecutive Billboard chart-topping albums followed, each a little more sophisticated and mature than its predecessors, though Eddie's playing remained joyously unrestrained. Sammy departed in acrimonious circumstances following 1995's *Balance* album – "*Balance* was like pulling teeth," he told this writer. "Things had got very dysfunctional by then" – but Eddie forged on, recruiting Extreme vocalist Gary Cherone for the confusingly-titled *III* album. Though the album received the worst reviews of his band's career – "The fundamental problem with this album is the songs," one UK rock magazine declared. "They're shit" – the guitarist never lost his passion for the music… or the attendant lifestyle. In Japan to promote Black Label Society's *Sonic Brew* album, Zakk Wylde caught up with Eddie in Tokyo, where Van Halen were booked to play three nights at the historic Budokan venue, and ended up partying with his hero into the wee hours.

"Van Halen opened up with *Unchained* and Ed was just killing it," Zakk recalls. "He came up to my hotel room afterwards and he was playing my Les Paul, with the bullseye, and the guitar was hanging around his knees like Jimmy Page in 1975. He was playing every Led Zeppelin lick that he knew, from back when Van Halen played covers. It was insane, I had Jesus Christ in my room playing Jimmy Page licks on my guitar. Quite a night."

That childlike sense of wonder intrinsic in Eddie's playing from his very first time seeing Jimmy Page onstage never seemed to fade.

"All we're trying to do is put some excitement back into rock'n'roll," he said as his band's 1978 debut was racked in record stores worldwide. "It seems like a lot of people are old enough to be our daddies and they sound like it, or they act like it. It seems like they forgot what rock'n'roll is all about."

Eddie Van Halen's passing on October 6, after a long battle with cancer, hit the rock community hard, and tributes poured in from friends and fans alike. On Instagram, Slash posted a single black and white image of Eddie Van Halen with his self-made 'Frankenstrat' guitar and wrote 'RIP #EddieVanHalen'. Tool's Adam Jones posted three broken heart emojis. Machine Head mainman Robb Flynn called Eddie "the G.O.A.T. [Greatest Of All Time]", adding: "My mind is seriously blown right now. I cried. He was one in a billion."

Having battled cancer himself in recent years, Tony Iommi's tribute to his old pal carried an added level of poignancy.

"I'm just devastated to hear the news of the passing of my dear friend Eddie Van Halen," Iommi wrote. "He fought a long and hard battle with his cancer right to the very end. Eddie was one of a very special kind of person, a really great friend. Rest In Peace my dear friend till we meet again."

In one of his last major interviews, with *Music Radar*, Van Halen was asked if he had any advice for aspiring guitar players. His answer was wonderfully simple.

"Bottom line is, you've gotta love what you're doing," he replied. "There are no rules. You have 12 fucking notes… do whatever you want with them."

"Eddie reminded us that music is freedom," says Halestorm's Lzzy Hale. "He inspired all of us to be unapologetically ourselves when it comes to technique or how we see the guitar. Rock stars don't fade, their magic is passed down and lives forever through all of us. I believe that not just this generation, but many generations to come will be influenced in some way by Eddie's legacy."

Family business: Eddie onstage with his son, Wolfgang Van Halen

"EDDIE WAS JESUS CHRIST, THE SECOND COMING"

ZAKK WYLDE

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Devil's Advocates

They preach Satanism, bathe their crowds in blood and play the unholiest strain of… *doo-wop* music? In January, we crowned metal's new favourite cult band: Twin Temple

WORDS: MERLIN ALDERSLADE • PICTURES: TRAVIS SHINN

TWIN TEMPLE

"Satan is good!"

Twin Temple singer Alexandra James is praising the Great Horned One because, after three failed attempts, we've finally managed to sort the connection for this evening's interview. We can't imagine that The Devil himself ever envisioned his name being praised courtesy of a Google Hangout, but then again, we can't imagine he ever envisioned something like Twin Temple, either.

"We never formulated this as a 'gimmick'," Alexandra later insists. "This is who we are and this is the band that we wanted to put out. I think, a lot of times, anything new and fresh that people haven't seen before is a 'novelty', it's a 'gimmick', because it's brand new. But, I think over time, that idea will wear off."

Among all the exciting young bands you'll read about in this mag, the rise and rise of Twin Temple might just be the most unlikely story of all. They are formed of LA-based wife and husband duo Alexandra (vocals) and Zachary (guitar), plus a touring band that includes a drummer, bassist, keyboardist and a saxophone player. None of that is too outside the realms of heavy metal folklore these days – the likes of Ghost and Ihsahn have shown that even a saxophone has a welcome place in our world. But this is something entirely different. For a start, Twin Temple don't actually play heavy metal. They play doo-wop – the soulful, swinging, early strain of rock'n'roll that first emerged within young black communities in 1930s America, eventually sweeping the US's biggest cities come the turn of the 50s. And, despite playing music that really isn't metal at all, in 2021 Twin Temple stand as one of the metal scene's most exciting young names.

"We were really excited that metal just opened their arms and their leather jackets and let us in, because we had no fucking clue who a Twin Temple fan would be," Alexandra laughs. "It's not like we're fucking Slayer, laying down the heaviest, face-melting blastbeats. I'm glad that metal has welcomed us into the black circle."

We shouldn't be surprised. If there's one thing metalheads appreciate almost as much as a big-ass riff, it's music that is truly subversive: those rare bands who are able to connect with us not because they go as hard and heavy as possible, but because they capture the *feeling* of what metal is all about, eschewing the norm to blaze a trail born of the left-hand path. Twin Temple are a band that have been able to capture that vibe more than most, because it's an ethos they live by. Alexandra and Zachary are devout Satanists, and their doo-wop jams tell stories not of broken hearts and romantic flings, but of liberation, defiance, sexual empowerment and blasphemy, all carried by catchy arrangements and Alexandra's rich, jazzy vocals. It's like listening to Amy Winehouse sing about Lucifer. And it's all rooted in the same basic principles that have made rock'n'roll such an enduring, exciting form of expression across the years.

"A lot of metal draws from the occult, from Satanism," points out Alexandra. "It's subversive, it's in your face, it's not for everyone, it champions the outsider, and that really goes back to its roots in rock'n'roll. Tony Iommi wasn't against the music that we're playing – he wanted to be the fucking Beatles, you know? When you watch a lot of these pioneers of early metal, they're listening to Elvis! The metal gods love rock'n'roll, so honestly, it makes sense."

It certainly helps that Twin Temple look cool as fuck. Their stage gear sees them dressed in matching black and red evening wear, Alexandra donning a Winehouse-esque beehive, Zachary opting for a Misfits (or should that be Elvis?)-aping devilock. They look like members of a secret vampire clubhouse from the 1950s that you'd be dying to join. And theirs is a club that's growing.

Twin Temple's beginnings were innocuous enough. Both California lifers, Alexandra grew up in the Bay Area while Zachary moved around the Sunshine State as a youngster, eventually settling back near his birthplace of LA. They both had a solid musical upbringing – Alexandra's parents liked "pretty good music, like David Bowie", while Zachary's were fans of Sabbath, Dylan, The Stones and other zeitgeist-capturing heavyweights – "my mom turned me onto Alice Cooper," he notes nonchalantly. For Zachary, his love of rock grew when he discovered punk and metal – "edgier stuff like the Misfits and Slayer", while Alexandra's musical journey would ultimately lead her to early punk bands like the Ramones – "one of the first songs I learned on guitar was *I Wanna Be Your Boyfriend*". They'd eventually meet each other in the LA punk scene, finding kindred spirits not just in a love of alternative, subversive music, but in a shared rejection of societal norms, in the pursuit of personal liberation, of equality and the tearing down of the old ways of the patriarchy. It was a path that would eventually lead them to identifying as Satanists, even if they didn't fully know it at the time.

Zachary James: sadly, the nickname 'Evil Elvis' is already taken

"We were definitely feeling the same feelings and thinking the same thoughts, I just don't think we had the vocabulary [of Satanism] yet," says Zachary. "We weren't calling ourselves that, we figured that out later. But it was just that disdain for authority, knowing that being a creative individual, there's nothing wrong with that; you should be able to do whatever you want to do."

"Yeah, and also just the delight in subverting cultural norms," adds Alexandra. "A desire to burn down

"WE HAD NO CLUE WHO OUR FANS WOULD BE"

ALEXANDRA JAMES

the old guard and all the stale-ass authoritarians telling you ridiculous dogma and who you can and can't be, and who you're 'supposed' to be in society."

If it sounds like the duo are taking an opportunity to dish out some self-righteous posturing, it couldn't be further from the truth. Alexandra and Zachary are a pleasure to talk to: friendly, charming and easily likeable. Alexandra is by far the more animated of the two; she's breezy, talkative and enthusiastic, her Californian drawl occasionally punctuated by quirky Brit-isms courtesy of her English mother (at one point she calls a corner shop an "offie"). Zachary is no less pleasant if a little more reserved, his deep, relaxed voice often expanding on Alexandra's thoughts and answers. They clearly have great chemistry, so it's not surprising that they ended up taking their relationship into the workplace; on Halloween 2016, they officially formed Twin Temple – a brand new vessel where their shared loves of rock'n'roll music, heavy metal culture and the progressive values of Satanism could fully flourish. It all made perfect sense, even if there were plenty of challenges ahead to get their new project properly moving.

"Zach and I always had a burning desire to create something," Alexandra says. "But there are so many hurdles to starting a band – 'I need a bass player', 'I need a guitar', 'I need a car to get from point A to B…'"

Plus, once they managed to get all that admin sorted, there were other hurdles to try and clear – such as exactly who in the blue hell would want to listen to a doo-wop band singing about Satan?

"We honestly thought there wouldn't be any Twin Temple fans," Alexandra

Alexandra James: ready for your unholy communion?

admits now. "Flat out, [people in the] industry told us, 'You will have zero fans, you're going to alienate literally everyone who this is for. There's a vintage gospel/soul scene, but you can't bring *Satan* into that! That's Christian music!'"

But to criticise Twin Temple for not fitting in is to miss the point entirely. The true spirit of rock'n'roll lies in its history as music made by outcasts, for outcasts – the rebels, the misfits, the underdogs. It's in the genre's DNA; while Elvis was still learning to walk, Sister Rosetta Tharpe – a black, female guitarist from Arkansas – was busy innovating the style of music that'd shape his career. Without her, we'd have no Little Richard, and without him? No Motörhead. For Alexandra – a mixed-race woman living in America with an English mother and a Korean father – rock music represented one avenue where her outsider status suddenly made sense to her.

"I had my first death threat at age six over the fence from my neighbour, who said he was gonna fucking kill me and my 'gook dad'," she tells us. "I had to run in and ask what a 'gook' is and why they wanted to kill me. That's scary as a kid, and it really informed my perspective as feeling like an outsider. As I moved through life, I discovered art and writing and different ways to express myself, and then also discovered Satanism and all these different, empowering ways of taking back your identity. I've always resonated with things that are subversive."

Undeterred by the cynics, Twin Temple ploughed on, playing local shows and earning a reputation as one of the funnest, most unique young bands in the LA rock scene. Their gigs, featuring Satanic sermons and bloody rituals, became a place where people of all walks of life could come and feel safe, welcome and empowered, all while dancing their asses off. There were sincere messages at the heart of it all – messages of feminism, equality, empowerment and celebration of the self – but it was all in the name of having fun and not taking life too seriously. After all: you can only take yourself *so* seriously wearing a beehive and dousing someone in blood while your saxophone player looks on, right?

"That's exactly it, and I think that's what it boils down to for us," agrees Alexandra. "We don't take ourselves so seriously – we take what we *do* extremely seriously. This is our life and our love and our passion project, and we treat it as a part of ourselves because it is. However, we're definitely not afraid to take the mick out of ourselves. In fact, we make a point to make fun of ourselves as frequently as possible – we know what we're doing is ridiculous, and it should be funny. Music, at the end of the day, should be fun."

"I HAD MY FIRST DEATH THREAT AT AGE SIX"

ALEXANDRA JAMES

Twin Temple's shows weren't just fun – they were an absolute riot, and while a 2017 single, *Let's Hang Together*, helped further their profile, the demand for a full album to soundtrack the gigs became too much to ignore. In 2018, they released a studio full-length, *Twin Temple (Bring You Their Signature Sound... Satanic Doo-Wop)*. It was a raucous 35 minutes of groovy doo-wop bangers, recorded in a day and a half and released in a limited physical format of just 666 copies. It sold like Satanic hotcakes, and the band were invited to reissue the album on Rise Above, the label founded by Cathedral and Napalm Death legend, Lee Dorrian.

"We were so excited," says Zachary. "We've loved so many records he's put out, and obviously his own bands..."

"Yeah, we're a big fan of his artistic output and his ethos with Rise Above," adds Alexandra, "so when he was interested in re-releasing the album with Rise Above, he seemed like the obvious choice to go with that record – especially since he was like, 'We'll do exactly what you want!'"

The legend of Twin Temple continued to grow, ably helped along by shows across the US and Europe and a fabulously scandalous, strictly NSFW video for *Sex Magick*, featuring nudity, buckets of blood and a shedload of seductively subversive imagery (seriously, don't watch this one on your company laptop). The gigs got bigger, funner and more extravagant, and the merch began to sell out. Soon, the people who rejected the idea that Twin Temple could be a success started looking all the sillier; in the summer of last year, the band signed with metal management megaweights The Rick Sales Entertainment Group (Slayer, Ghost, Gojira).

While the pandemic put the brakes on many of their 2020 plans – "we were just so fucking excited about the tours we had lined up," bemoans Alexandra – they still managed to stay on the radar and grow their cult that bit more, performing live sermons and streamed shows (including one starring puppets, obviously) and even releasing a live album, *Stripped From The Crypt*. After all, you know what they say about The Devil and idle hands...

"The way we're looking at it is just an opportunity to explore some different things," Alexandra says. "I think it's a painful time, but I'm excited to see what spawns from this time."

One thing that will hopefully spawn is a new Twin Temple album. They're currently between labels, but you can almost guarantee they'll have more time, more support and more resources to bring their visions to life. But how far can doo-wop music about Satan really stretch? Is there room to evolve?

"We've been working on some new stuff," offers Zach. "It's been a different workflow given that we've just been locked away together. I think people can definitely expect a different approach to the music once it's released. It's also inspired by what's happening around us. That's constantly changing, and that inspires us as well."

Ultimately, the core of what Twin Temple is all about isn't just timeless – it's born of infinite possibilities. *Hammer* saw the band at a sold-out Jazz Cafe in London last year, and it was one of the most wholesome heavy metal experiences we've ever been a part of – not really a sentiment you'd expect of a gig that included Satanic verses and blood being smeared across the foreheads of the entire front row. It felt as all great gig experiences should feel – an event, a coming together, an absolute blast. Plus, past the expectation that was hanging in the air, the rabid responses from the crowd and the *huge* merch queues, it really felt like the start of something: the arrival of a new and vibrant force in the rock scene, a force that Alexandra and Zachary are prepared to see out to its fullest potential. As far as they're concerned, this band isn't a novelty or a 'wacky' distraction in dark times; in fact, they're just getting started. And while the music may evolve, the message will always stay the same.

"I mean, to me, the reservoir of music that's come before us is so deep and vast and inspiring," says Alexandra. "There are so many incredible songs and sounds to be inspired from, and I see the same with the occult – you're never at the same path on your journey that you were a year ago. So, I don't think it's ever gonna be exactly the same. But am I still a Satanist? Yeah. Do I still wanna see equal rights for women? Yes. Am I still positive about my body and sexuality and magick? Yes!"

"But..." adds Zachary, "...it's still gotta be some evil shit that bops."

A NEW TWIN TEMPLE ALBUM IS EXPECTED SOON

The couple that slays together, stays together

"WE'RE ON

Mongolian metallers The Hu might seem like an overnight sensation, but their success story is one decades in the making. In January, we got to the bottom of it.

WORDS: DANNII LEIVERS • PICTURES: ENKHBAT NYAMKHISHIG

A MISSION”

Jaya and Gala

"HU! HU! HU!" It's Saturday afternoon at Download Festival 2019 and a loud, insistent chant is coming from a corner of Donington Park. No, not *"SLAAAAAAAYYYYYYYYYERRRRR!"* – Kerry King and co don't play until tomorrow. It's the sound of thousands of metalheads crammed into the Dogtooth tent, and they're all here to see The Hu, the viral Mongolian folk metal phenomenon who are on their first visit to the UK. Before they even get onstage, it's madness. The crowd is five-deep outside the tent and everyone is punching the air and craning their necks to catch a glimpse of one of metal's most exciting new bands.

Despite their growing online profile, The Hu were taken aback by the response. "We were concerned: what's going to happen? How are people going to react to our music?" recalls the band's sweet but serious frontman, Gala, speaking over a Zoom call today via the band's interpreter, his brother Tuga. "Even when we played the last song, we could see people walking towards us. We didn't know that tent was packed beyond [capacity] until we saw the pictures."

Blending western metal with traditional Mongolian instruments and the incongruous sound of throat singing, The Hu have coined the term 'hunnu rock' to describe their style, meaning 'human' – and if they were a curiosity to start with, they sure as hell can't be dismissed as such now. "It's not about being Mongolian," Temka, the band's chilled and funny tovshuur (Mongolian guitar) player explained to The Guardian last year. "It's about being human." In the same way Rammstein and Babymetal have transcended the language barrier, The Hu's songs, which speak of Mongolian culture and history and are sung exclusively in the band's native tongue, have struck a chord with metal fans on a worldwide scale. "It amazes us how people connect to our music," says Jaya, the smiley and energetic multi-instrumentalist who sometimes punctuates his sentences with enthusiastic chants of, *"Hu! Hu! Hu!"*. "We think it's just the timing. The rock world needed something different, so we came up with something unique. Music is a universal language, you still get connected. You can pick up the chant along the way and that's exactly what happened with us."

The numbers are eye watering. At the time of writing, since being uploaded in autumn 2018, the video for their first single, *Yuve Yuve Yu*, has had more than 63 million views on YouTube. Its follow-up, *Wolf Totem*, has been viewed more than 44 million times. To put that into perspective, it dwarfs anything uploaded onto the streaming platform by Architects, Parkway Drive or even Slayer. Even a video series of The Hu cooking together, craftily named *Hu's In The Kitchen*? – which we reported on in *Metal Hammer* 338 – has been watched hundreds of thousands of times.

In 2019, the band signed a deal with Better Noise, the home of Papa Roach and Five Finger Death Punch. They were preparing to head off on a massive North American tour and unleash their debut, *The Gereg*, on the world right in the middle of it all. The hype soared as they dropped some reworked tracks with their labelmates: an adaption of *Yuve Yuve Yu* with Danny Case, the singer from nu metal band From Ashes To New, and a new version of *Wolf Totem* featuring a fired-up verse from Papa Roach's Jacoby Shaddix. In 2020 they released a rerecording of *Song Of Women* with Halestorm's Lzzy Hale, followed by a cover of Metallica's *Sad But True*, complete with an epic fantasy video.

And it isn't just the rock world that has sat up and taken notice. A videogame development studio, Respawn Entertainment, asked the band to contribute a song to the soundtrack of 2019's *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*. With Respawn and Lucasfilm, the band wrote the track *Sugaan Essena*, initially in Mongolian before translating it into a fictional, alien language specifically for the game. It seems their reach is endless.

"We feel love and support everywhere we go now," says Jaya. "Our first official gig outside Mongolia was at Rock Im Park Festival in Germany and it was the first slot at noon. Nobody comes to the stage at noon, so we didn't know how many people, maybe five, maybe 10 [would show up], but we were eager to play. When we got up, it was *full* of people. They were waiting for us chanting, *'Hu! Hu! Hu'*. They'd never seen our live concert before, but it was as if they were waiting for this super rock band that's been around for many years. What a way to start our journey…"

"WE DIDN'T KNOW THE TENT WAS PAST CAPACITY"

GALA, FRONTMAN

Unsurprisingly, given the speed of their ascent, life has changed for the band. In their hometown of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia's buzzing capital, they are frequently stopped on the street and asked for selfies. "Back in the day I could walk in the high street and nobody would notice, but now people know we're The Hu," smiles Gala. "We always treat people nicely, we are always open to taking pictures." And wherever the band go on tour, they're greeted with sold-out venues and devoted crowds, all bellowing their moniker. "When we were doing our first North America tour there was a group of people following us to every gig," says Temka. "Some of them had never travelled their own country. One of the girls we talked to said she had never left her own city but was doing a road trip."

It might seem like they appeared from nowhere, but The Hu have been doing this for a long time. Gala and Temka have been friends since they met at school aged 11, and Gala has been playing in local bands with Jaya and Enkush, The Hu's quiet, thoughtful lead Morin Khuur (horsehead fiddle) player, for the last 10 years. All four men studied music at the Mongolian State Music And Dance Conservatory in Ulaanbaatar, where they learned the noble art of throat singing and where Jaya has also taught. "We're on a mission. We've been working for it for decades," he says. "It's not an accident we've got here. We've been learning and mastering our skills at least 20 years each. We started at such young ages, professional schooling; a lot of learning and crafting our skills every day brought us here."

Under the rule of the socialist Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party, all western music was banned in Mongolia until 1992, although Jaya reveals that even back then bands were nudging at the boundaries. "There were bands that paved this world for us. Even though they were not legally allowed to play rock music, they would put some rock elements into their songs… subtle elements, enough to be legal!"

Having been born in the 90s, The Hu grew up listening to bands such as Metallica, Rammstein, System Of A Down and Queen. By the noughties, plenty of rock bands including Haranga, Altan Urag and Tengger Cavalry had sprung up in Mongolia, boasting a mild iteration of The Hu's culture-crossing sonic blend, but none managed to achieve the same international success.

It would take a visionary to take it to the next level. Like Babymetal,

whose fusion of brutal metal and J-pop was pioneered by Japanese producer Kobametal, the concept of merging western rock with traditional Mongolian instrumentation on a cinematic level was the idea of the band's producer and songwriter, B. 'Dashka' Dashdondog, who knew Gala from Ulaanbaatar's tight-knit music scene. In 2016, the pair began working together to bring Dashka's vision to life, but quickly realised they needed more bodies onboard, bringing in Gala's long-term friends and collaborators to complete the line-up.

"Dashka had this great idea already in his head but creating this music was a process," explains Gala. "It wasn't easy to find something nobody had done before. We didn't even know what we were chasing. Eventually we found the sound we were looking for."

The result was a combination of East and West, ancient and modern. Tapping into the legends and spiritual stories of the band's ancestors, many of the songs on the band's debut, *The Gereg*, are a call to arms. *Wolf Totem* tackles the concept of the inner warrior and facing your fears. *Shoog Shoog* is a call to the Tengri (Mongol Gods) and *Shireg Shireg* is a battle anthem set to the rhythm of horse hooves.

"The horse head fiddle is a traditional Mongolian instrument that has been played by our ancestors for thousands of years," explains Gala. "This instrument is connected to the horse and our history as horsemen. It is very important to our music."

War, horses, freedom – obviously this kind of thing is catnip to metalheads. But there's far more to these songs, which are intrinsically tied to Mongolia's vast landscapes and are accompanied by expensive, *Lord Of The Rings*-esque music videos that show its breathtaking scenery – mountains, deserts and great plains – in all its glory. "Throat singing is a style our ancestors used to communicate with nature by trying to make similar sounds as water and wind," explains Gala. "Protecting, co-existing with and respecting nature is very important and we'd like to share this culture with the world."

That determination to promote the beauty of their home country has not gone unnoticed. Last year, the band were awarded the Chinggis Khaan Order, by Mongolian President Khaltmaagiin Battulga. As the country's highest state distinction, it's usually reserved for high-profile politicians, and occasionally poets, singers and sportsmen who champion Mongolian culture. But until now, never bands. "It's a complete honour for us," says Gala. "This is such an important award. Before us, only 11 people in the country have received it and we were the first group of people. In the past it was only presented to individuals. [Now people will see] you don't have to be an individual to receive it."

"IT WASN'T EASY TO FIND SOMETHING NO ONE HAD DONE BEFORE"

GALA, FRONTMAN

The Hu: charging into 2021

The magnitude of these achievements is not lost on The Hu, and neither is the burden of heavy responsibility that comes as part of the package. According to the band, metal is still a small, underground movement, albeit it one that's ever-expanding. And aware that they are now the leaders of that scene, they are keen to ensure that others can follow in their wake. "It's not easy to be the ice-breaker," admits Jaya. "Following in someone's footsteps is easier most of the time. We work hard and we are proud to be the one to pave the way for other bands who will come after us. The satisfying thing is that other young people are coming up after us in Mongolia. We're inspiring these people. If you work hard, anything is possible. If you really love it and picture it, and work for it, things will happen. This is the most satisfying thing for us."

2020 should have been a massive year for them, including appearances at all Lollapalooza Festivals in America and Latin America, plus a set at Coachella, but COVID-19 put all that on ice. Now, though, the band are plotting their 2021. Not only are they hoping to revisit those plans, they have already announced European festival dates for the summer, not to mention they'll be releasing more of the songs that were recorded for *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order*. Then, of course, there's the question of the follow-up to *The Gereg*…

"We're working on our second album now; we're spending so much time at the studio," says Gala with a big grin, revealing that the band are planning to release their second record in mid-2021, although they're keeping tight-lipped about what it might entail or if any guests will feature on it. "Most of the songs are shaping up real good, it's going to sound just like The Hu. That's [a sound] we've found, and we're going to keep doing what we're doing. Yes there will be different ideas, we're always looking for something new, but we believe our style is unique. We called it 'hunnu rock' because there is no box we can put it into."

HEAD TO WWW.THEHUOFFICIAL.COM FOR MORE. THE HU'S SECOND ALBUM IS EXPECTED SOME TIME SOON

Temka and Enkush

ARCHITECTS

After the 2020 Australian bushfires halted their plans, Architects regrouped, relocated and prepared their challenging next chapter. In February, Sam Carter took us inside the results

NEVER LOOK BACK

WORDS: STEPHEN HILL • PICTURES: ED MASON

ARCHITECTS

Like many artists that have spent the last year confined to their homes, Architects vocalist Sam Carter has an abundance of excess energy. "Yeah, I'm just about to go out for a run," he laughs, fidgeting on his seat over a Zoom after we enquire why he is decked out in the full training kit of his beloved Manchester United. "I have to do something. It's been a nightmare not being able to do the thing we've done for the last, what, 15 years now? The [November] livestream at the Royal Albert Hall brought home how much we need that connection with people; it was great to play that venue, but I need that person screaming our songs back into my face."

Sam's desire to get Architects moving again is almost palpable through the screen – understandable, as 2021 will mark the start of a brand-new chapter for the band. Having experienced the stunning highs and gut-wrenching lows of the last five years – a period that saw them become a bona fide arena headline act and release critically adored albums in 2016's *All Our Gods Have Abandoned Us* and 2018's *Holy Hell*, while also suffering the tragic loss of guitarist and band leader, Tom Searle – Architects have regrouped. Their new era starts with the release of *For Those That Wish To Exist*, their ninth album, and first not to feature a single note or writing credit from Tom. Make no mistake: they may be an established band, but this is far from business as usual.

"I miss Tom, I love him, I think about him every day, he will always be a part of this band, he will always be there onstage with us at every show," Sam says. "You don't forget your best friend. He would want us to continue on though, and I know he would look at this album and be really proud of us; he'd probably say, 'How the fuck have you done this?!' because we didn't know how to make a record without him! If people want to say we're a different band, or a new band or whatever… as much as it hurts a little bit, it's kind of true. We really couldn't have made this album two years ago."

The genesis of *For Those That Wish To Exist* began almost immediately after the release of *Holy Hell*, but really accelerated when the band played their last 'proper' show in front of an audience in Australia at the start of last year. Their plans were disrupted, not by COVID 19, but by the bush fires that decimated the country.

"YOU WEREN'T ALLOWED INTO TOWN WITH CHILDREN. IT WAS SCARY"

SAM CARTER

"We planned on staying in Australia and working on the record but then the fires happened and we had to leave," Sam sighs. "Dan [Searle, drummer] was out there with his kid and there were days where you weren't allowed into the town centre with children. It was really scary, and it was like, 'We've been talking about this stuff for years!' So, to be in it when something this terrifying and tragic actually was happening to the environment… I think that helplessness informed the record quite a lot."

Unable to stay in Australia, the band decided to instead regroup in Bali to write and demo the record. Self-producing it, they would get up with the sunrise, eat breakfast and then work for five hours, stuffing towels in the walls of their huts to soundproof their surroundings as they tracked drums and worked out how to create as a band again. It's a process which Sam says bonded the band even further, and it was where *For Those…* really took shape.

"We never look back," he smiles. "We did The [London] Roundhouse, then Brixton Academy, Wembley… it's always been that way. But as you sit there on this beach in Bali, with hardly anyone else there, looking at the sea and the sun and herons flying over you, you can't help but take stock. I think that helped us make a choice of what we were going to do with this record; you realise that whatever we do, no matter how far we stray from what people think we are, if *we* do it, then it's Architects."

The results of this soul-searching can be heard clearly on *For Those That Wish To Exist* – it is, in Sam's words, a very different, more rounded version of Architects. The singer is quick to admit it's not as sonically heavy as their previous works; in fact, in many places, it is more perfectly, sweetly melodious than they have ever sounded. Yet despite its sonic brightness, it is still as thematically dark as you'd expect: still scathingly questioning of the worst aspects of the human condition, often pondering on the fragility of our existence. There might not be quite so many 'blehs' and breakdowns, but an album of such existential interrogation is far from disposable pop.

"We felt we had to not be scared to do something new," explains Sam. "I go on about The Beatles all the time; they are a band who can write very deep, very serious, dark songs and have them stick in your head. That's not throwaway, that's the true mark of genius. Dan has something that is beyond most people when it comes to writing lyrics, which is why I don't bother! He brings me things and I think, 'My god, where did that come from?' but it just nails our concerns about the world. We sit down and talk about what each song is about. All of us agree on the things this band stands for: I don't think we, this generation, are going to save this planet. It might sound miserable, but there really is so little to be happy about, so, of course, we question that."

Architects (left to right): Josh Middleton, Adam Christianson, Sam Carter, Alex Dean, Dan Searle

Architects' Royal Albert Hall November livestream gave Sam pangs – they miss the live connection with their fans

The band are joined on the record by what Sam calls a collection of 'guest rockers': Parkway Drive's Winston McCall, Simon Neil of Biffy Clyro and Royal Blood frontman, Mike Kerr.

"It's cool for us, because in 100 years' time people will listen to this and go, 'Oh, they must have been mates!'" Sam chuckles. "I love that idea. Winston is the best, we've known [Parkway] for years and they are perfect, both as people and a band. I grew up in the same village as Mike, it's mad that the two of us have come from this little place, I'm so proud of what he's achieved. Biffy have always been such an inspiration to us as a band; when [2007 album] *Puzzle* came out we all looked at it and went, 'They're doing this weird shit and people love them, so why can't we?' We've all always wanted to hear Simon Neil over Architects riffs."

As good as the guests are, they can't overshadow the strides Architects have made. The record ends with the fragile, beautiful *Dying Is Absolutely Safe*, which, as well as being as soaring and fragile as they have ever sounded, almost acts as a disclaimer for the nihilism that has gone before it. It's a song that Sam thinks is one of the most important in the band's career.

"I saw that documentary about Ozzy Osbourne where he finds out he has Parkinson's," he begins. "And he says to the doctor, 'Is it terminal?' and the doctor says, 'No, but life is.' I just thought, 'We have to get that in a song.' The first time I heard it in full I looked at my fiancée and she had tears in her eyes, and I just broke down as well. Now, every time I hear it, I cry; God knows how we're going to play it live. I think it's the perfect way to end the record, which might sound mad because we're talking about death, but it's right: we are all going to go through it, so dying is perfectly safe, so what have you got to worry about? That's what we want this album to represent: to live your life fearlessly."

"WHATEVER WE DO, NO MATTER HOW FAR WE STRAY, IT'S STILL ARCHITECTS"

SAM CARTER

***FOR THOSE THAT WISH TO EXIST* IS OUT NOW VIA EPITAPH**

EXISTENTIAL NIGHTMARES

Sam takes us through five cuts from the latest album

ANIMALS
"This is my favourite Architects song ever. It's because it was the first time we have done the thing that we were discussing doing with Tom before he died. He would be so stoked that we have pulled this off. We had this saying that we wanted our music to be 'bio-industrial'... I don't know why we said 'bio', we were joking around, but we meant 'organic' industrial. When we finally nailed it we knew that he'd be really proud of it."

DEAD BUTTERFLIES
"It's so out-there for a band like us to do something like this, to have a horn section and a string section. I remember having to listen to the horn section tracking remotely in Norway. It was insane. It felt like a really proud moment where we made that happen ourselves, and we paid for it all from our own pockets. I was proud of the integrity of the band – we did it properly!"

DYING IS ABSOLUTELY SAFE
"It's a song that we've always wanted to do, but maybe we weren't quite good enough before or maybe we didn't think we could do it justice, I don't know. But now we have."

IMPERMANENCE
"It's the perfect heavy Architects song. Maybe what we've been searching for all of these years: the riff, the groove, the breakdown. If we were going to give you one absolute rager then it had to be a special one, and this is."

BLACK LUNGS
"I think this is a perfect blend of old and new Architects. When Josh sent us through the riff I thought, 'Woo! We're cooking with gas!' He's been around us a while now and he is writing different kinds of riffs. He's always been a great guitarist but he's just continually getting better."

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ALEXI LAIHO

JOBY SESSIONS

ALEXI LAIHO

WILD AT HEART

Earlier this year, metal mourned as news broke that Children Of Bodom founder Alexi Laiho had died at the age of 41. He was known as an electrifying musician – the proud 'Wildchild' who could light up a fretboard. But he was also a gentle soul and a devoted friend

WORDS: DANNII LEIVERS

ALEXI LAIHO

Alexi Laiho was the kind of performer you didn't forget in a hurry. On October 31, 1997, the frontman and his band, a then-unknown Children Of Bodom, were set to support Norwegian black metallers Dimmu Borgir in Helsinki. The show was a huge deal for Bodom. Dimmu were a much bigger name, having just released their third album, *Enthrone Darkness Triumphant*, while the venue, the Lepakko, was legendary in rock circles. They needed to make an impression.

"We could hear the opening band playing from backstage," remembers Dimmu Borgir guitarist, Silenoz. "We were like, 'Holy shit, what is this?' It sounded like Yngwie Malmsteen on speed. We ran out and watched the spectacle and stood there with our jaws open…"

"There was this fucking beast on the guitar," adds Dimmu's then-keyboardist Kim Goss, who would go on to form power metal band Sinergy with Alexi in 1997, and marry him in 2002. "I was looking at our guitar player like, 'I don't know, man, you've got some competition…"

On January 4, 2021, when the news broke that Alexi had passed away, an outpouring of emotion ensued from the metal world. When we asked for contributions to a piece that would celebrate Alexi and his immeasurable impact on metal, we received more tributes and memories than we could hope to print in full. They all painted a picture of a man who was deeply loved and admired, and whose friendship and silly sense of humour touched everyone in his life.

"We had a secret language between us," says Kim. "We went to Estonia together in 1998 and on the entire ferry ride there we spoke the entire dialogue of the first *Back To The Future* movie verbatim, not just word for word, but sound effects."

"My favourite memory is probably the time we got these ridiculous Ali G-style tracksuits custom airbrushed for the 70,000 Tons Of Metal cruise to prank the karaoke night," adds ex-GWAR member and costume designer, Kim Dylla. "Mine said 'Ghostface Dylla' on the back, and his said 'Eazy-A, Original Gangsta 358' – the country code for Finland."

Those who knew him describe him as a softly spoken, gentle soul with a reckless, spontaneous side, the 'Wildchild' who out-partied everyone around him.

"His art was brutal and aggressive, but that was just one side of that furious, big-hearted tender guy," says Reckless Love frontman Olli Herman, who played with Alexi in glam rock tribute act The Local Band. "He was like the big brother I never had."

But first and foremost, Alexi will go down in metal's history books as a modern guitar hero. In 2008, he won the coveted Dimebag Darrell Shredder Award at *Metal Hammer*'s Golden Gods, and the following year he was voted Best Metal Guitarist by the readers of *Guitar World* – but he was more than just a rip-your-face-off shredder. He was a visionary who opened the door for melody and flamboyance to infiltrate the darkest, most extreme corners of metal. With Children Of Bodom, Alexi threw together genre combinations that had never been attempted before. Black and power metal, melodeath, classical, thrash… he glued it altogether with batshit fast solos and a 'fuck you' attitude that inspired a whole generation of would-be players.

"There are some guitar players who treat playing guitar like a sport, and Alexi had that speed and that accuracy, but he also had such a voice to his guitar playing," says Svalbard singer and guitarist, Serena Cherry. "Sometimes you might not know someone personally, but you feel like you know them through listening to their guitar playing. That was the case with Alexi for me. I felt all his personality oozing out of every solo that he played onstage."

"You WILL stay and listen to more Bon Jovi!" Alexi with Mastodon's Brann Dailor

At *Metal Hammer*'s Golden Gods 2008: Alexi with his Dimebag Darrell Shredder award

"WE RAN OUT AND WATCHED HIM, JAWS OPEN"

SILENOZ, DIMMU BORGIR

WITH BRANN: COURTESY OF KRISTEN MULDERIG. GOLDEN GODS 2008: KEVIN NIXON.

All revved up: Alexi posing for a *Hammer* photoshoot in 2015

WILL IRELAND

Living the dream: hanging at Wacken in 2008

JOHN N MCMURTRIE

Onstage in Los Angeles. Alexi lived to play his guitar

Growing up in the city of Espoo, a short drive from Finland's capital Helsinki, Alexi was just four when he heard his dad blasting Dire Straits and immediately realised his calling in life. "I went up to my dad, like, 'What is that?'" he told EMP Live TV. "I heard the riff, and I'm like, 'That's so awesome.' I thought it was the best thing ever. He's like, 'That's guitar.' And I was like, 'That's what I wanna do.' No bullshit."

Born to musical parents who played myriad instruments, by the time he was 11, when his dad bought him his first guitar, Alexi had developed an obsession with 80s hair metal and a love for guitarists such as Randy Rhoads, Jake E. Lee, Zakk Wylde and Steve Vai. He formed his first band aged 14, and a year later, with the blessing of his parents, had dropped out of school. "I got a job and everything, but all I did was just concentrate on playing, practising, writing music."

In 1993, he formed Inearthed with school friend and drummer Jaska Raatikainen. But by 1997, the band had changed their name to Children Of Bodom, signed to Spinefarm Records and unleashed themselves on a metal scene that didn't know what the hell to make of them. Back then, extreme metal was a straight-laced, deadly serious affair while, over in the mainstream, post-grunge was where personality went to die, and there was no space for overt and intricate virtuosity among nu metal's blunt-force posturing. Among it all, Bodom's debut, *Something Wild*, landed like a blast from an atomic bomb – an adrenaline-fuelled explosion of frenzied solos, epic keys and boisterous choruses. It was fun, frantic and the sound of a guitarist doing exactly what he wanted: a defiant middle finger to trend and fashion that refused to be to be defined by the limitations of any one scene.

"There was a lot of pressure to conform, but I just didn't care about that," Alexi recalled. "We're talking about a really small underground metal circuit. I was definitely the best guitar player around. I could just kick anybody's ass, and I was appreciated for that."

"We really liked what we were doing, but at the same time we were like, 'What are we? What is this music?'" remembers ex-Children Of Bodom bassist Henkka Seppälä. "I'm not exaggerating here; we were very sure that this would be something that would not fall into anybody's taste."

Alexi didn't share his concerns. "When the [*Something Wild*] recording was done, Alexi printed the master CD and wrote on it: 'The future gold-selling album'," laughs Henkka. "He was joking, of course. We thought if we were lucky we'd sell a few hundred copies, but 10 years after, it actually sold gold."

"HIS PERSONALITY OOZED OUT OF EVERY SOLO"

SERENA CHERRY, SVALBARD

Finnish metal was in the middle of a renaissance in the late 90s, with bands such as HIM, Sonata Arctica, Apocalyptica and Nightwish emerging from the scene. Bodom, on the other hand, took a few years to break through. The band's second album, *Hatebreeder*, built on the ideas rammed into *Something Wild* and was more polished in terms of songcraft, but it was 2003's *Hate Crew Deathroll* that shot to No.1 in Finland and made the metal world at large sit up and take notice. That year, they were named Metal Band Of The Year at the Finnish Metal Music Awards, and were headlining venues across Europe and even Japan. Most significantly, they *finally* got onto their first USA tour, on a bill alongside Nevermore, Hypocrisy and old pals Dimmu Borgir.

"That was the album where we'd finally found our own path and our own style," Alexi told Billboard in 2017. "Because up until then, we were kind of like going here and there. Sort of looking for what we're all about. And I think on *Hate Crew*, we had finally captured it. That's definitely one of not only the most important albums for Children Of Bodom, but definitely one of the best. For a lot of people, it's their favourite record of Children Of Bodom – and I don't blame them. I don't mean to toot my own horn, but it is pretty fucking badass. When I look back and I listen to it, I'm like, 'Shit, man. We nailed it.'"

As the band's profile grew, so did Alexi's reputation, not only as a world-class shredder but as the dude who ▶

STEPHANIE CABRAL

could out-drink and out-party pretty much anyone. Enthusiastically aping the hedonistic lifestyle of his heroes Mötley Crüe and Skid Row, the stories became legendary – a catalogue of chaotic nights and boozed-up injuries that only cemented his notoriety as one of the hardest-living metal musicians of our time.

As Bodom wrapped up their tour for *Hate Crew Deathroll* in 2004, Alexi hit the town with some mates, later falling onto his face and breaking his wrist. The timing couldn't have been worse. Unable to play guitar for seven weeks, the band were forced to pull out of a Dimebag Darrell tribute gig in Finland, while Alexi was due to appear on a *Guitar World* magazine cover with none other than Zakk Wylde and Steve Vai, two guitarists he'd worshipped since being old enough to hold a guitar. "It was insane," he told us. "I couldn't say no so I just got up there with a cast on my arm and they made the black eye look good."

Zakk Wylde guffaws at the memory. "I remember he had the cast," he says. "It was like a girl getting ready for her wedding, it's like the biggest day of her life, and she's got a broken arm and black eye for her wedding pictures. That was actually pretty funny, but that's what actually makes it great."

Bodom arguably reached their peak with 2005's *Are You Dead Yet?*, the title track famously referring to Alexi's hellraising antics. The album pushed them up yet another level. Then, one of the biggest metal bands on the planet came calling: Slayer, inviting them to join the 2006 edition of The Unholy Alliance Tour.

"*Are You Dead Yet?* was probably my favourite album by them," says Slayer guitarist Kerry King. Even back then I was like, 'This is the next dude, this is the next guitar hero.' He's one of those effortless guys that you watch and you're like, 'Fuck! I've been working all day and I can't do that shit?'"

Joining a strong line-up alongside Lamb Of God and Mastodon, Children Of Bodom held their own against Slayer's notoriously hard-to-impress fanbase. "They went down OK; I've seen people go out there and just fail miserably," says Kerry. "Their setlist was on the heavier side, which is a smart thing to do when you're opening for us. I was up there almost every night watching them. They're fun to watch play and Alexi was a guitar god."

Recalling that tour, Henkka remembers Alexi as "the guy who started the parties" and who was "really good at making friends", not intimidated by the prospect of hanging out with the bands he had, until then, considered idols. "Many people fall into the trick that they start to drink Jäger with Kerry, but Kerry has a huge tolerance," Henkka laughs. "There were many nights when Alexi was carried away from Kerry's room."

Fans in high places: Alexi with Kerry King

"ALEXI WAS A GUITAR GOD"

KERRY KING

At that time, Alexi was also the ringleader of one of Bodom's most infamous drinking traditions. "We had this ritual where whoever wanted to become a member of the Hate Crew had to come to our tourbus back lounge, get naked and stand on his head. We would pour whiskey in his mouth, which would always end up in the nose," laughs Henkka. And who has been inducted into this crew in this manner? "At least Randy Blythe. Then after that he also got the tattoo, so he did it very officially."

"That tour was basically summer camp," says Mastodon drummer/singer Brann Dailor. "The Children Of Bodom guys were supposed to get a couple of cases of vodka, but the runner screwed up and got rum. I walked into their backstage room and there were 20 bottles of rum all over the carpet and they were just staring at it scratching their heads. They were like, 'Fuck it, let's get a blender.' They all got hats like they were on vacation and they made rum blender drinks in their bus. It was like Mötley Crüe '82 on steroids in their bus. All they listened to was 80s hair metal. Skid Row and Winger. I was like, 'I got to get off this bus. I don't want to listen to Bon Jovi anymore, guys!'"

Those kind of stories make great headlines, sure. But behind the scenes and the haze of booze, Alexi was struggling with issues that had dogged him from a young age, admitting, "My childhood was OK, but by the time I was about 17 I was pretty fucked in the head."

The pressure of the band's steady climb towards metal's upper echelons took its toll. In a late-00s interview, Alexi admitted to *Hammer* that he had attempted suicide in the late 90s: "I popped a load of pills and drank a bottle of whiskey. Obviously, I didn't die, but I was taken to a psychiatric hospital and had my stomach pumped. I had a complete fucking nervous breakdown."

Over the years, Alexi would talk, always with admirable frankness, about his depression and the mental turmoil behind his music, but he often insisted it was the band that pulled him through his darkest moments: "Playing guitar is something that, y'know, if I would ever dread losing something, that'd be the first thing that came into my mind," he told us. "I really love it and even just holding the guitar, that's when I feel like a whole person."

Are You Dead Yet? was Bodom's most unabashed stab at the mainstream, and despite the boost it gave to the band's profile, it received a mixed response from fans. In 2008, they followed it up with *Blooddrunk*, a patchy affair that did little to quell the feeling that Bodom's ascent was stalling. Furthermore, Alexi's health continued to be a cause for concern, leading to a string of cancelled appearances. In 2007 another injury, this time to his shoulder following a fall at a bowling alley, put him out of action for six weeks, forcing the band to pull out of Dubai's Desert Rock festival. Two years later, when he fell in the tourbus, breaking his shoulder and some of his ribs, the band

WITH KERRY KING: COURTESY OF KRISTEN MULDERIG

Children Of Bodom in 2018, a year before they broke up

pulled out of their US tour with Lamb Of God, albeit not before Alexi had soldiered on for a number of shows, despite internal bleeding which left him vomiting blood backstage.

Unsurprisingly, interviews around their next album, 2011's refocused and revitalising *Relentless Reckless Forever*, centred on Alexi's state of mind as much as it did the music. But not only was the album widely viewed as a razor-sharp and technically proficient return to the form of 2003's *Hate Crew Deathroll*, it found the frontman in a much better place.

"I can't keep up with the same lifestyle as I always did," he told *Hammer*. "I can't slam a bottle of whiskey when I get up in the morning. OK, that's exaggerated, but you know it got pretty harsh at some point and I didn't notice. I was still functioning as a person and as a musician, I never fucked up a show or anything, but, you know, I realised that I need to calm down, I need to take care of myself."

Despite the rejuvenation palpable in their later work, Children Of Bodom split in 2019, as Henkka, Jaska and keyboardist Janne Wirman announced their intention to step away from the band after more than two decades. Their last show was at the Helsinki Ice Hall on December 15. "We did everything we always do," says Henkka. "We did the fist-bumps before the show, hugged after the show and said, 'See you around.' Everyone was happy and the spirits were good. Of course it was sad too, because we knew we were not going to play again together, but we pulled it off."

Hellraisers: Alexi with Lemmy at an LA premiere in January 2011

Unable to continue using the COB moniker due to copyright issues, Alexi formed new band Bodom After Midnight with remaining guitarist Daniel Freyberg, plus new drummer Waltteri Väyrynen, ex-Santa Cruz bassist Mitja Toivonen and COB touring keyboardist Lauri Salomaa, and prepared to launch an entirely new chapter of his career. In October 2020, they performed three tiny gigs in Finland. "We were supposed to start writing the record, record that this year and release it in 2022, but it wasn't meant to be," says Daniel sadly. "He was very excited. He had new drive, new motivation and he really wanted to show that he could still kick ass."

"He was so happy those gigs happened at small clubs," adds Kim Goss. "He was like, 'Fuck fancy.' He played sharp, he sang great and his new line-up was killer. I know he's so proud those gigs are the last three gigs that exist in this world. It took him back to his roots: small clubs, great energy and new energy."

It's heartbreaking to think we will never get to feel Alexi's electric presence onstage again, see him frantically tearing up the fretboard at a demented speed, and hear those squealing solos that earned him his place among the all-time greats, so full of life and joy.

"You see people like Steve Vai and Zakk Wylde, heavy metal superstars," says Olli Herman. "Alexi was in the same level with those guys. He was amongst them."

Alexi left us far too soon, but we will remember him as a once-in-a-lifetime player who broke down barriers, changed metal for the better and inspired the next generation to blaze trails. Of course, none of that was important to him. Humble to the very end, it was always the music, not accolades or legacies, that mattered.

"I don't do this shit for the awards or for the compliments," he told us. "I do it for the music and for the love of playing. End of fuckin' story." What a legend.

COB: PRESS. WITH LEMMY: COURTESY OF KRISTEN MULDERIG

RAMMSTEIN

50 MM/S

PRESS/OLAF HEINE

NAME:	AUSGABE:
RAMMSTEIN	MUTTER

Mutter Behind the Game

With two albums under their leather belts and the gag between their teeth, Rammstein had a point to prove in 2001. Back in Spring, we dissected the legacy of *Mutter*

WORDS: ALEC CHILLINGWORTH

The headline screamed, 'Nazis? Heil no!' This wasn't one of the usual outrageous tabloid rags, though – this was a mainstream UK music publication. Why? The year was 1998 and a band had used footage of Leni Riefenstahl's 1938 film, *Olympia*, in their latest music video – a cover of Depeche Mode's *Stripped*. While originally created as propaganda for the infamous 'Nazi Olympics', the movie is now routinely name-checked as a vital moment in cinematic history. But the band in question were German, sparking fears of fascism.

It was Rammstein: the Berlin six-piece who'd lived under hardline socialist rule in the German Democratic Republic. The staunchly liberal band. The band with the fire. The band with the dildos. But Britain didn't know all that yet…

"We are not Nazis, Neo-Nazis, or any other kind of Nazi!' said the band emphatically in a statement quoted in the piece, stating that the footage was used as an example of good art. "We are against racism, bigotry or any other type of discrimination."

It was a strange start for a band who were about to embark on an effort to win over Britain. "They were convinced it would never happen in the UK," says Anna Maslowicz, the PR guru who took Rammstein under her wing a year or so after that headline. "The first time I met them, I said, 'You're gonna be playing stadiums in the future.' And they said, 'Never. We'll never be accepted here. We sing in German.'"

That admission seems surprising in light of how things were going for the band. While their debut album, 1995's *Herzeleid*, flopped onto CD players and was met with a somewhat flaccid reception, it caught the ear of Nine Inch Nails' Trent Reznor and filmmaking legend David Lynch – they loved it so much, two songs ended up on Lynch's 1997 neo-noir cinematic nightmare, *Lost Highway*.

Album Nummer zwei, *Sehnsucht*, booted the door down later that year. Its lead single, *Engel*, reached No.3 in the German singles charts. Up next was *Du Hast*, now a setlist staple, which somehow became a US radio hit and pipped The Smashing Pumpkins to a heavy rotation slot on MTV.

They were playing to thousands of devotees in mainland Europe and blowtorching a serious reputation across the pond. Thorsten Zahn, former editor of German alternative magazine *Visions* and the current editor-in-chief at *Metal Hammer*

Richard takes out the eyebrows of the first eight rows

Germany, was sold hook, line and sphincter from day one. But as Rammstein hunkered down to make the album that would become *Mutter*, a seed of doubt sprouted in his brain: how could the band exceed expectations again?

"Everyone was afraid which direction they'd go next," he says of the band's Deutsche fanbase. "Everyone was nervous that the third record would turn out bad."

There was one man who definitely wasn't nervous: Jacob Hellner.

The Swedish producer had already worked with the band on *Herzeleid* and *Sehnsucht*, and would continue to produce every record save for 2019's self-titled. He remembers the mid-1999 gestation period of Rammstein's defining chapter.

"[With] how the music world worked back in those days, your third album would define whether you were there to stay or just a flash in the pan," he explains. "They realised that, and even though they'd had massive hits with *Sehnsucht*, they still had the bravery to follow their artistic instinct and go where they went.

"They rented Haus Weimar in Heiligendamm, a small town by the Baltic Sea," he continues. "It was a hangout for the East German political top brass, and in those days, it was

Ollie Riedel, Christoph 'Doom' Schneider, Christian 'Flake' Lorenz, Till Lindemann, Richard Z. Kruspe and Paul Landers ponder oversized Christmas crackers as a merch idea

really worn down – they rented the caretaker's house. The whole foundation of the album was laid out in that house."

Aside from the presence of a minor celebrity – the German Shepherd who played Hitler's dog in 2004's *Downfall*, if you were curious – these sessions were unremarkable and workmanlike. The next year saw Rammstein road-test pretty much the entire album at a fan club gig in Berlin, before recording the tracks in France's Studio Miraval.

Musically, it was a definite swerve from the hyperactive, videogame-ish industrial metal of albums prior. *Mutter*'s grandiose chuggery was accentuated with the help of the Deutsches Filmorchester Babelsberg, whose swelling strings run through the title track, *Mein Herz Brennt* and *Nebel*.

GETTY

PRESS/OLAF HEINE

Jacob had a very specific, very German target in mind for the sound: Richard Wagner. But there was nearly a cock-up.

"I've always had a soft spot for when they did that kind of drama, which was possible in the slower and mid-tempo stuff – there was more space to really go into those colours," he says. "The orchestra was a high and low point at the same time. We'd been recommended someone to transpose it – these notes by the cellos, these by the violas, and so on. We had this enormously expensive orchestra come into this enormously expensive studio [Studio Saal 1, Berlin], and when they started to play the music, it just sounded strange. Really awkward. We were so fucking stressed out, and not until we'd done that for two or three hours did we realise that this transcription guy had changed stuff – he'd changed the arrangements! We convinced the orchestra to come back the next day, and the guy spent all night redoing it."

"THEY WERE CONVINCED THEY'D NEVER BE ACCEPTED IN THE UK"

ANNA MASLOWICZ, FORMER RAMMSTEIN PR

Once recorded, Jacob mixed *Mutter* alongside Stefan Glaumann and hashed it out with the band, often for hours at a time. "The post-production discussions became quite heated, with various camps – me included – taking sides and trying to convince the other half whether a particular track should be included or not!" Jacob laughs. "That's their strength. They can have these never-ending discussions and end up with Rammstein."

The focus fell on acoustic-sounding percussion locking into those regimented, mechanical riffs – something else Jacob appears to have had a hand in.

"Composition-wise, Jacob is a very important key in the chain – that was a role not many people got to see, except the band," says Ronald Prent, the mixing engineer responsible for Rammstein's core sound on *Herzeleid* and *Sehnsucht*, who also oversaw preliminary *Mutter* mixes in June 2000. "The band has great ideas, great riffs, and Till [Lindemann, vocals] writes amazing lyrics and controls the ▶

German language like no other… but Jacob was the common denominator that brought it together into a song."

Speaking of the German language, on the run-up to *Mutter*'s release, Anna was preparing a proper push for Rammstein's PR campaign in the UK. Before this, the band had only played one UK show, at London's Powerhaus in 1997. Essentially a pub, the venue bore witness to Till taking the stage with laser goggles before setting himself on fire. One publication gave it three out of five. Rammstein needed someone to give a shit.

"At the start, they did all the interviews using a translator," says Anna. "Christoph and Paul [Schneider and Landers, on drums and guitar respectively] came over and did interviews. People felt a bit uncomfortable, so I explained that English wasn't their first language, and it shouldn't be a hindrance – they shouldn't not be able to do press because they can't speak perfect English. I think, because of that piece [with the Nazi headline], they didn't want to be misunderstood or misquoted.

"The only hard bit was persuading people about interviews with a translator," she continues. "People were aware of them, but they hadn't really come to the UK and done anything. People needed access to them – be exposed to them – for them to progress in the UK."

On April 2, 2001, *Mutter* was born. The baffling, *Snow White*-themed music video for lead single *Sonne* had been doing the rounds on music television, and before anyone could fully sink into *Mutter*'s musical embrace, they had to look at *that* cover. Photographed by German couple Daniel and Geo Fuchs, it frames the vulnerable, heartbreaking image of a dead foetus preserved in formaldehyde.

"The cover was a big scandal in Germany, as everyone said, 'You cannot show a dead baby!'," recalls Thorsten, who'd just started as editor at *Metal Hammer* Germany. "Then they said, 'Well, is it really dead? Is it not dead? Are you allowed to show a dead baby on the front cover of a major record?'. Then you saw the photos of all the guys in the liquid too. This was something that they directed. They wanted it. They're a magnet for provocation."

No matter what people thought of the artwork, *Mutter*'s sonic content was too explosive to deny. As with every Rammstein record, it comprises 11 songs – they sprint across a 45-minute run-time, spattering the music and lyrics further across the canvas than ever before. The riffs hit harder, the vocals more commanding, the drums punchier, the keys dripping with sorrow and silliness in equal measure. It was Rammstein 2.0, and with *Ich Will*, *Feuer Frei!*, *Sonne* and *Links 2 3 4*, it had absolute tunes for days. Irrefutable proof that they had more in their locker than just *Du Hast* and a worn-out strap-on.

"Fucking hell, it is… bangers," says Winston McCall, vocalist of Parkway Drive – a band whose fire-fuelled live show is indebted to the Germans' onstage chaos. "I'm hooked from the word 'go'. *Mein Herz Brennt*, as an opening track, sets the tone so well. The grandness straight-up, the strings coming in straight away, then the female vocalisations coming in the whole way through the record, tying it with that whole *Mutter* theme – it's fucking genius."

For Winston, an Australian, the maternal theme is more apparent through the music. But for Thorsten,

Weirdly, when *Futurama* put heads in jars, it wasn't nearly as controversial

PHOTOGRAPHY: DANIEL AND GEO FUCHS. IMAGE TREATMENT: FORMGEBER.

Where there's smoke, there's fire: Till Lindemann onstage in the Netherlands, December 2001

and German listeners at large, *Mutter* was more than thematic – its effect was profoundly literal (see A Labour Of Love, p.44). "A record called *Mutter* – 'mother' – is a pretty strong expression," Thorsten elaborates. "[Most people] have a very special relationship to their own mother, and if you like this band and the sound they put on a record called *Mutter*, all of a sudden you have a special relationship to this record.

"The diversity of the songs made this pretty intense," he continues. "*Links 2 3 4*, that's where they show their political views – they do left-wing lyrics with a marching military beat. When Till sings *'Sie wollen mein Herz am rechten Fleck / Doch sehe ich dann nach unten weg / Da schlägt es links / Links'* [translated loosely as 'They want my heart on the right spot / But then I look below it beats left there / Left'], for a German audience, it is crazy to hear. Then you look down at yourself and see that your heart too beats at the left side. Everyone's does."

Elsewhere, the band venture into gentler territories – the aforementioned title track and *Nebel*, the record's coda, achieve the melancholy balladeering the band hadn't quite nailed on previous outings. For the latter, Rammstein re-enlisted Bobo: the singer whose syrupy vocals made *Engel* such a hit four years prior (see "I was touched by its timeless beauty", right). Here, though, she's slight – almost hidden, an Easter Egg for anyone listening properly. After banging your head and thumping your thighs like Till does onstage, it's almost a relief… until you cotton on to what the song's about.

"ARE YOU ALLOWED TO SHOW A DEAD BABY ON THE COVER OF A RECORD?"
THORSTEN ZAHN, *METAL HAMMER* GERMANY

"It's a fog in the morning, and it's about this relationship between two older people," says Thorsten. "She will obviously die, and this is the last kiss

GETTY. BOBO: STEFANIE MARCUS

"I WAS TOUCHED BY ITS TIMELESS BEAUTY"

German singer Bobo reveals what it was like to sing on dark closer *Nebel*

HOW DID THE BAND APPROACH YOU FOR NEBEL?
"In the early 90s, I was playing with my indie rock band, Bobo In White Wooden Houses. They'd already invited me to sing the female part on *Engel*, which was when we began to record together – it was just meant to be the bridge of the song, and then developed into a repeating chorus. When they recorded *Mutter* a few years later, they asked me into the studio again to try some different lines."

THE ROLE YOU PLAY ON *NEBEL* IS VERY DIFFERENT TO *ENGEL*. HOW MUCH DIRECTION DID THEY GIVE YOU?
"The whole recording was just an enjoyable, positive flow. Three takes and we had it. Jacob Hellner always used to say, 'Let's see where we end up.' I like that kind of approach – it gives you the spirit of freedom. But at the same time, they had a very clear idea of what kind of mood or flavour they wanted to add to their music. For *Nebel*, they asked me to do some high atmospheric sighs, and [when] we sang in unison in the chorus, I found a second voice. I still love that song, and for me it's one of their best. Till probably wasn't in the studio when I recorded; I guess he was too polite and wanted to let me do my work in peace!"

DID TILL EXPLAIN THE MEANING OF THE LYRICS TO YOU?
"No, he didn't explain anything, reticent as he is. It is a song about love and death. Until death will tear us apart. The lyrics reminded me of German Romanticism, almost mystical, with a classical feel and spirit in between the lines. Listening to it again now after such a long time, I was really touched by its timeless beauty."

she will get from him. It's so intense – you can really cry to it."

Mutter was more significant than just a piece of plastic on a CD deck or turntable. Sure, reviews were a bit middling, and people still used Nazi puns that went out of fashion at the same time as the Third Reich. But the album instantly topped the charts in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Of its five (five!) initial singles, *Ich Will* and *Feuer Frei!* crept into the UK Top 40. Clearly, somebody liked it. For the fans, this was the moment Rammstein became more than just a band – they were now something you had to consume, experience, live and breathe. It was a phenomenon the press couldn't ignore any longer.

"I've never had so many industry people blag tickets off me for shows," laughs Anna, who has counted the likes of Nine Inch Nails and Blink-182 as PR clients. "We concentrated on the rock press for the actual interviews, but for the live shows, we went, 'Right, let's invite the *NME*, let's invite all the broadsheets.' And the reviews were just amazing – 'You'll never see a show like this, it's next level.' It's so much more than a live show."

Covering more than 100 dates between May 2001 and July 2002, the Mutter tour brought Rammstein's musical step-up to life, flinging them from theatres to arenas in most territories. Kitted out with lifeless tiles to conjure images of an old-fashioned, East German delivery room, the show started with the band's keyboard player, Flake, at his instrument.

"We'd had an old dentist's chair repurposed for me to use as a keyboard stand, and I wore a white doctor's coat," he writes in his book, *It's The World's Birthday Today*. "Tom [Morawetz, the band's long-term tour assistant] came up with the idea of pinning a blood bag to it. Lord knows where he got hold of that."

From there, he started fingering the ghastly opening to *5/4*, one of *Mutter*'s criminally overlooked B-sides. A massive, red, pulsating uterus descended from the venue's ceiling.

Wait, what?

"I designed a huge uterus that they came out of," LeRoy Bennett, an A-list lighting and production designer, told *Hammer* in 2019. "The birthing canal they were coming out of was a tube that was used for escaping out of a fire, and it had fireproof webbing on the inside that zig-zagged through it. Normally you'd have clothes on while going down it, but because they were coming through in diapers, their skin would get web-burned, so we had to cut the tube short so they could slide out easier."

Dressing for the occasion: Rammstein backstage at the MTV Europe Music Awards on November 8, 2001

"MUTTER WAS LIKE A NEW DEFINITION OF HEAVY"

JOCKE SKOG, CLAWFINGER

It was a swerve into the absurd on an unprecedented scale, larger than life and completely one-off. Just six years prior, they'd supported Swedish rap metallers Clawfinger in 500-capacity clubs. Now Rammstein's fortunes had changed, they returned the favour and offered the Swedes a support slot.

"When *Mutter* came, it was like a new definition of heavy," says Clawfinger's co-founder and keyboard player, Jocke Skog. "We only realised [how popular Rammstein had become] when we came to the first show of the tour and saw this incredible, huge spaceship theatre going on, and it was to, like, 20,000 people! They told us, 'We've put 80% of all the money we make back into this tour.'

"They had huge bangs going on – we could feel it when we were sat eating in catering," he details. "It was like an old American action movie with bombs, explosions and absolutely no plot. I've

GETTY.

Toasty! Our favourite pyromaniacs on 2001's Pledge of Allegiance tour supporting Slipknot and System Of A Down

always been a tech geek too, and they had two full-sized Apple computers, with one for backup. We were standing in one of those 20,000-capacity venues, you can hear the birth of the band, then suddenly it's pitch black. Silence, for 30 seconds. We looked at each other like, 'Holy fuck, the computer died!' The audience was like, 'Are we supposed to clap now?' Then suddenly, *Mein Herz Brennt* starts. I asked what the fuck happened, and they were like, 'Yeah, the first computer broke, then the second one broke, so we had to restart the whole thing – fuck the intro.' One guy was still hanging from the uterus, ha! It was like, 'BLACKOUT, REMOVE EVERYTHING, GET THEIR CLOTHES ON!'"

Hold-ups in the ute-chute aside, the *Mutter* tour seemingly went off without a hitch. Even the postponement of Rammstein's much-hyped London show couldn't dent their momentum – the local authorities pulled their gig at the 2,000-capacity Astoria at the last minute due to safety concerns, but it was rearranged for later in 2001, with 5,000 bums on seats at Brixton Academy. The album only peaked at #86 in the charts, but you can't stand between the British public and a concert where the singer pretends to spunk all over the keyboard player.

"After that first media run, they never looked back," says Anna. "The UK embraced them."

Everything was finally happening, until it wasn't. A September/October US tour supporting Slipknot and System Of A Down was cut short for Rammstein, due to interpersonal tensions compounded by the 9/11 terror attacks. Richard Kruspe, the band's guitarist, actually saw the second plane hit. Flake packed his bags and headed home mid-tour. "We totally slipped into this wave of hysteria, and I found the frenzied atmosphere very frightening," he said in 2015's *Rammstein In Amerika* documentary.

They didn't return to North America for nine years, and in that time, their legend grew there as it did around the globe. Because Rammstein are the only band to have ever done this – to make a success of uncompromising, industrial, German metal filtered through a transgressive, performance art lens. It's best suited for Berlin bondage dungeons, not Olympic stadiums. So why were they playing *Feuer Frei!* in the opening scenes of blockbuster movies like *xXx*, warming audiences up for two hours of shit-housery with Vin Diesel?

"As far as *Mutter* goes, it is sloganeering done to fucking perfection – every chorus is literally, like, a line," says Winston. "Everything about it is made to get into your brain, and it's pounded in there by riffs that are fucking relentless. There's always a lot of tongue in cheek with whatever Rammstein do, of course there fucking is, but this is the one where the seriousness of the art can't be fucked with. That, accompanied by dudes shitting flames out of their faces."

In 2021, it's still watertight. Peter Tägtgren, the producer who's worked with everyone from Immortal to Amon Amarth, Children Of Bodom and Till ▶

GETTY.

Till in 2001, helpfully demonstrating the 'shitting flames from their faces' technique

"IT'S DUDES SHITTING FLAMES OUT OF THEIR FACES"

WINSTON MCCALL, PARKWAY DRIVE

Lindemann himself, cites the record as a lesson in how the genre should sound. The singles are regular rock club staples, and still occupy a sizeable chunk of the setlist whenever Rammstein drag their macabre monolith of a show on the road. It's endlessly replayable: the jewel in the band's kinky crown.

Thorsten puts their success down to camaraderie. "They stayed together like a family," he concludes. "Like best friends. Nobody from the outside can bring anything between them – they do everything by their own rules. They're doing these super-huge pyros you never thought of in a stadium, artwork you never thought possible, lyrics people would go to jail for – you know what I mean? They try everything. No borders."

Alles Gute zum Geburtstag *Mutter*. Happy birthday, *Mutter*.

RAMMSTEIN ARE SCHEDULED TO TOUR IN 2022. FOR UPDATES, SEE RAMMSTEIN.DE/EN/ AND METALHAMMER.COM.

A LABOUR OF LOVE

Oxford university lecturer Dr Alexandra Lloyd takes us through the deep lyrical content of *Mutter*

"*Mutter* ('Mother') takes us on a journey from cradle to grave, stopping off to take in love, sex and politics. There are references to German literature throughout Rammstein's songs, and *Mutter* is set in the world of the 19th century – a time when the idea of children as innately innocent came to be established; when the Brothers Grimm collected fairy tales rife with violence, oppression, and suffering. It was also the heyday of Dark Romanticism and the Gothic, exploring the supernatural, evil and the grotesque. It is the stuff of children's (and adults') nightmares."

"First track *Mein Herz Brennt* ('My Heart Is Burning') begins by quoting *Sandmännchen*, a German children's TV show. The Little Sandman of the title is from a much older story, best known in its 19th-century retelling by ETA Hoffmann. In this version, he steals children's eyes. *Spieluhr* ('Music Box') is based around the Gothic preoccupation with being buried alive. *Feuer Frei!* ('Fire At Will') plays with different meanings of fire, including the proverb 'gebranntes Kind scheut das Feuer' ('the burnt child dreads the fire', or as our tamer English version has it, 'once bitten, twice shy'). The lyrics of *Sonne* ('Sun') have nothing to do with fairy tales (it was originally written as a Russian boxer's entry music), but in the video the band serve a drug-addled Snow White."

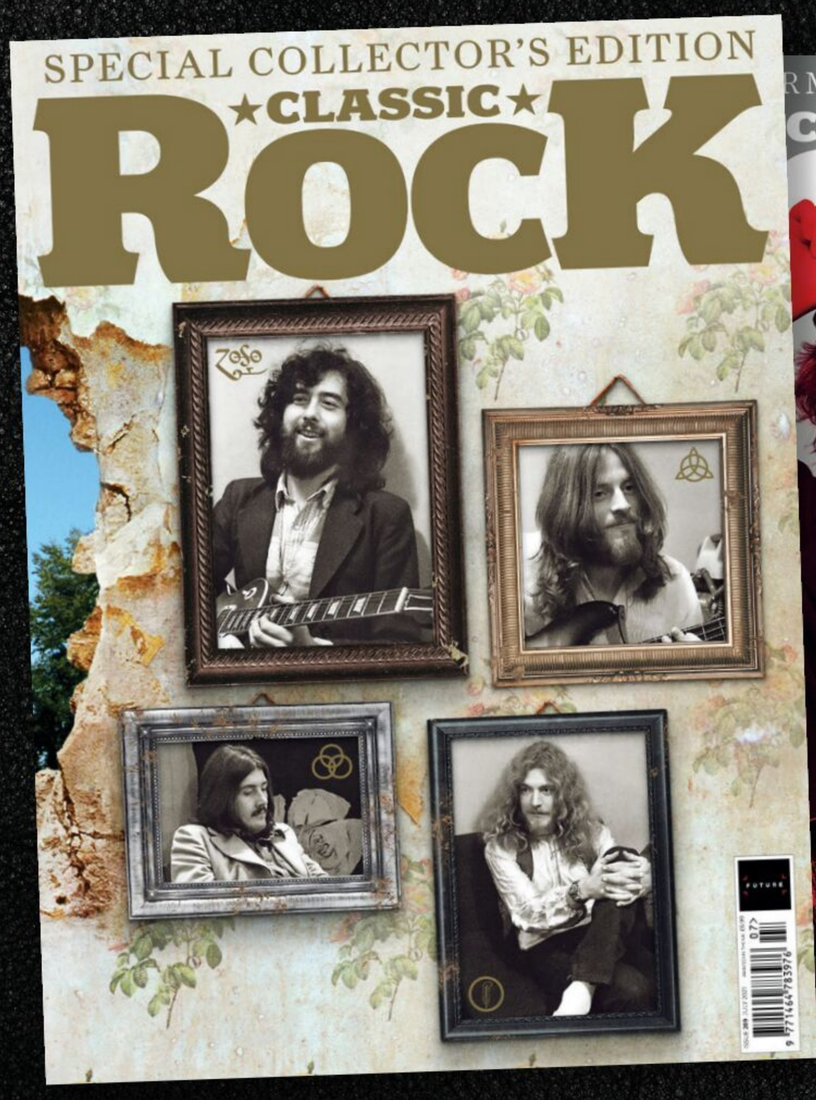
"There's also a lot of sex: the perfunctory kind in *Rein Raus* ('In, Out'), and total self-love in *Zwitter* ('Hermaphrodite'). *Nebel* ('Fog'), features echoes of poets Friedrich Hölderlin and Bertolt Brecht. Read the title backwards and you get 'Leben' ('Life'). *Links 2 3 4* ('Left 2 3 4') famously addressed accusations that Rammstein were neo-fascists and plays on Brecht's *Einheitsfrontlied* ('United Front Song'), written to rally and unite left-wingers after the Nazis took power."

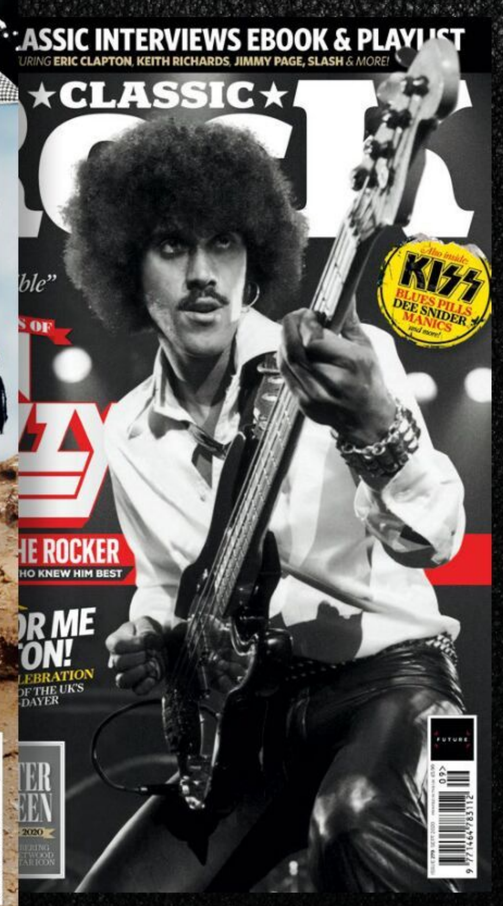
"The title track is most rooted in the world of the Gothic and the fairy tale. Mothers are absent, children abandoned. We meet a figure 'conceived in hate and without seed/semen', without a belly button (like Adam), never suckled. It might be a comment on human cloning, or the bandmembers' own relationships with their mothers. There are also echoes of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, originally published with the subtitle 'The Modern Prometheus', referring to the original pyromaniac who, in Greek mythology, defied the gods by stealing fire. Rammstein's shows use grandiose fire effects and the word 'fire' is among the most used in their lyrics."

"The song's narrator is fixated on his absent mother: he both yearns for her and wants to poison and then drown her. The creature has a birthmark (literally a mother's mark: 'Muttermal'), sometimes seen as referring to ex-USSR premier Mikhail Gorbachev: indeed, the tortured relationship between offspring and parent has been read as a symbol for East Germany and/or Mother Russia. Given that *Mutter* came out a decade after German reunification, this makes sense – even more so after you see the video for 2019's *Deutschland* and its focus on German identity. That video also links directly to this album, when a piano version of *Sonne* plays over the end credits."

"All these ideas make sense, but Rammstein's lyrics are not there to be decoded. Like good poetry, they are open, and you bring your own experiences and ideas. I can't listen to *Mutter* – and especially the line '*In ihren Lungen wohnt ein Aal*' ('an eel is living in her lungs') – without thinking about Günter Grass's 1959 novel *The Tin Drum*, in which the central character's pregnant mother dies from eating grotesque quantities of fish, after she sees eels swarming a dead horse's head on a beach. *Mutter* leaves you with the sense that, sometimes, the nightmares begin when you wake up."

GETTY. DR ALEXANDRA LLOYD: PRESS.





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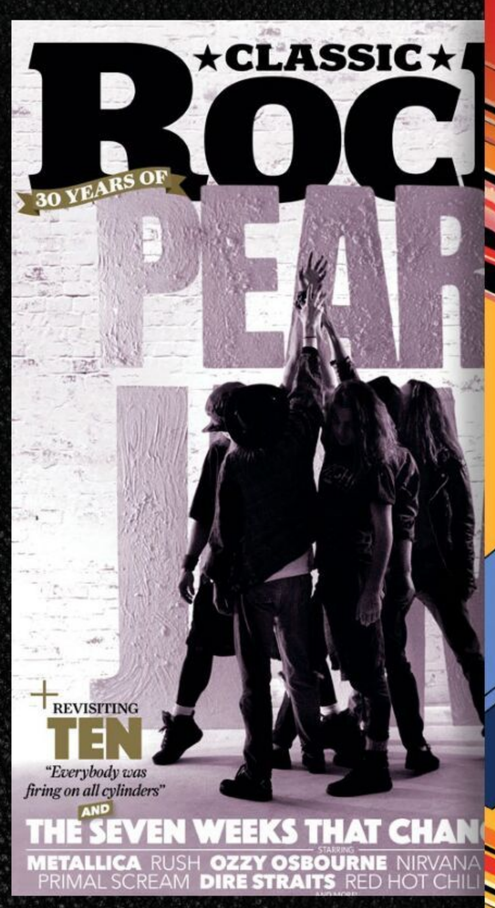

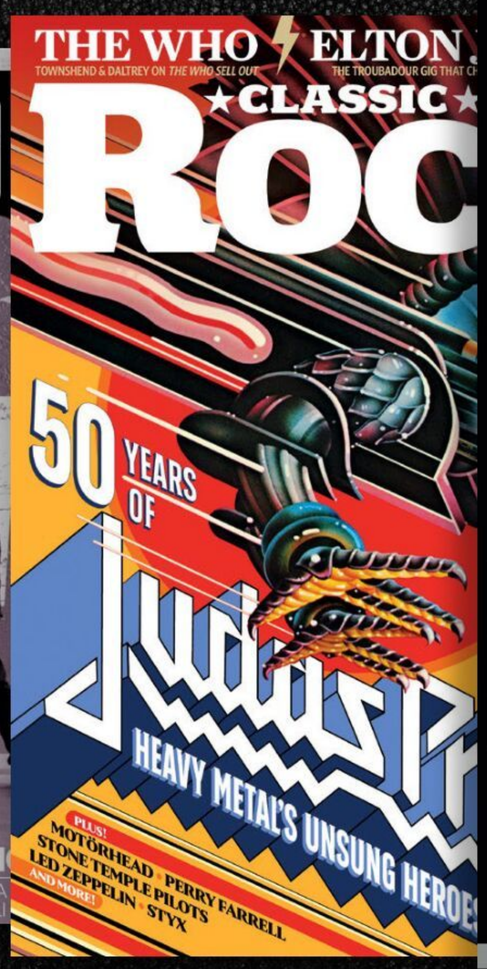

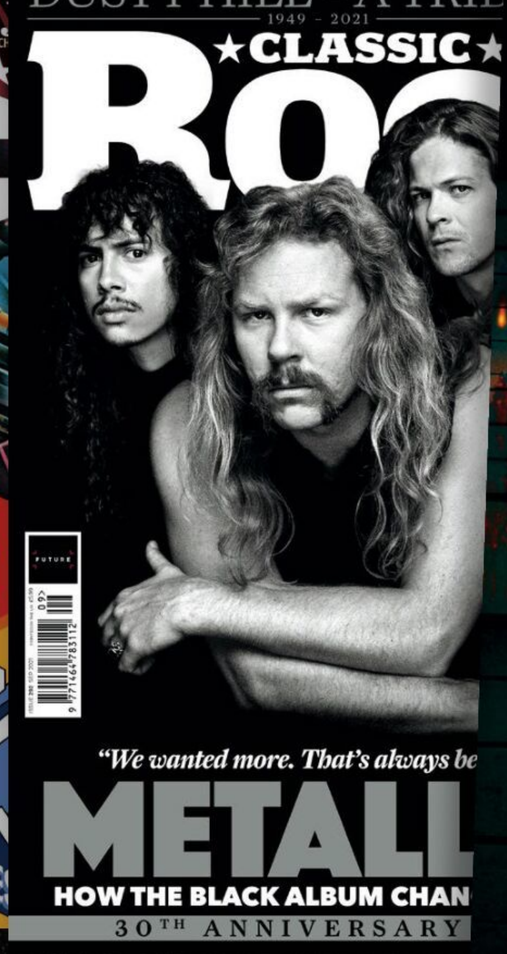

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EVANESCENCE

EVANESCENCE HADN'T RELEASED A 'PROPER' ALBUM FOR 10 YEARS...

... and yet, ahead of the release of latest album *The Bitter Truth* in March, Amy Lee revealed that the past decade had been far from uneventful

WORDS: POLLY GLASS • PICTURES: NICK FANCHER

Evanescence (left to right): Jen Majura, Tim McCord, Amy Lee, Will Hunt, Troy McLawhorn

Like so many performers with a strong, specific public image, Amy Lee is not all she seems. Ostensibly her world is one of gothic melodrama and opulent metal. Basques and ball gowns. It's what she's been known for since 2003, when Evanescence's mega-hit *Bring Me To Life* made her a superstar at 21.

Her next ambition, though? It might surprise you…

"Y'know what would be really cool?" she says over our Zoom audio call, in chipper tones. "I've always thought it would be fun to be a part of creating the score to a great nature documentary, like *Planet Earth*, one of those amazing David Attenborough ones, underwater particularly. Every time I watch something like that I think, '*God*, it'd be fun to work on the score for that!'"

Now 39, Amy is a woman of many sides. The oddball child of the grunge era and poster girl for nu metal, who owes as much to Nine Inch Nails and Björk as her old classical flame, Mozart. The compulsive busy bee with two pianos in her house and heaps of keyboards in her home studio. The chatty mother of one and former New Yorker, who moved to her current Nashville base just before Covid hit.

Here, she's kept herself sane by writing, gaming and cooking, rather than sitting passively in front of Netflix. "I get anxious!" she chuckles. "I mean, I'll play a videogame for four hours straight but I'm doing something, y'know? I have a say in what's happening! I'm just a person that needs to keep my hands busy, to some degree."

There are media-savvy edges to her warmth. In conversation she's unfailingly sweet but holds a certain amount back, glossing over some points with the polite but firm ease of someone who's been doing interviews her entire adult life. Not to mention the philosophical but bullshit-free manner of a successful woman nearing 40, who's weathered her share of speculation and 'Sexiest Female' awards.

"Ha ha! Erm yeah, no comment there!" she laughs, a warning note coming into her voice, when we ask if it's helped having a qualified therapist in the house – husband Josh Hartzler – during these weird times. "What's helped is having a supportive husband. He really has helped just be there to support me and do the dirty work, and do a lot of dishes and all the stuff that piles up."

In the end, much of Amy's 2020 was filled with work on Evanescence's long-awaited fifth album, *The Bitter Truth*. Working again with producer Nick Raskulinecz (Mastodon, Halestorm, Code Orange), they have been drip-feeding singles to the public and now, finally, the full record is done. A rich, heavy smorgasbord of all the classic Evanescence ingredients

– muscular nu metal riffs, punchy electronics, lush orchestral layers and colossal, gut-grabbing tunes – it was worth the wait.

Seeds of some songs go back as far as 10 years, but the bulk began to germinate on tour in 2019. After 2017's *Synthesis*, on which they reworked previous material with orchestral arrangements, the band were ready to record again.

"We went back to that same room where we wrote a lot of the songs for our [2011] self-titled album, and just got together in a circle, plugged in our stuff and started jamming. What headspace were we in? Feeling no pressure that we *needed* to do something, but just that we *wanted* to."

Recording began at Nick's Nashville studio in early 2020, until the pandemic hit and sent everyone packing. As people started to gingerly emerge from their homes, the band reassembled in Nashville when it was safe to do so. Bassist Tim McCord, drummer Will Hunt and guitarist Troy McLawhorn all stayed in tourbuses, while guitarist Jen Majura collaborated remotely from Germany.

"MY BROTHER IS ALL OVER THIS RECORD"

AMY LEE

For Amy in particular, it marked the culmination of an eventful decade in which she wrote music for films, made an album of children's music (2016's *Dream Too Much*) and reconvened with Evanescence for the aforementioned *Synthesis*. And, of course, the band continued to tour. Still, the question 'Why 10 years?' has featured consistently in recent interviews with the band. How does she feel about being asked that, at this point?

"The question is interesting because it assumes that I am the girl from Evanescence, and that is what I do, and it was only ever gonna be a matter of time before I came out and made another album," she muses. "That's just not really real life. I am very proud of all that we've done and it's a huge part of my life, but I've always had an open mind about whatever the next chapter might be."

Emotionally there have been significant highs and lows. Amy became a mother (her son with Josh, Jack, was born in 2014). There were "major tragic losses" among her bandmates. News outlets began buzzing when she filed a lawsuit against their old label, Wind-Up, amid rumours of unpaid royalties and other allegations.

"I don't want to spend too much time talking about the business struggles," she says when we bring it up, "for a lot of reasons. But I just

PICTURE: CREDIT

want to say that I think people might think, from the vague way that I talk about it, that there was this one label and they were so bad; it's really not that simple. It's about the people around us, the people working with us, the people representing us, a whole lot of… housecleaning that needed to be done."

Real tragedy, however, came in 2018. Following long-term struggles with severe epilepsy, Amy's brother Robby died at the tragically young age of 24. Listening to *The Bitter Truth*, it's hard not to interpret much of it – the lyrics (*'I don't know if I'll be alright, but I have to try'* in *Broken Pieces Shine*), the orchestral swells, the heartbreaking melodies – as an expression of grief.

"All over it," she says simply, of her brother's presence on the record. "He's all over it."

To really understand Amy Lee today, it helps to go back to her formative years. The oldest of five siblings, all of whom learned an instrument, she fell in love with the piano and from there delved into a mix of styles. The family moved a lot, settling in Arkansas when Amy was in her teens. Her attic bedroom there was a haven of hard rock, alternative music posters and dolls. It was here where she started writing songs.

"I had that [Pearl Jam] *Ten* poster with all the guys with their hands up touching," she remembers, "and this big Kurt Cobain poster of him in the white glasses, and I remember having a Down poster that I ripped out of a magazine 'cos it was like, 'Look how *cool*!'"

The posters have gone, but the dolls still live in her studio (you may have seen them behind her on the band's recent *Jimmy Kimmel* live stream). "I've always kinda kept them as my mascots to remind me like… the way it looked when it all began."

Her father, a radio DJ and multi-instrumentalist from Florida, was her earliest musical influence. "He's like me in that he'll just get inspired by something he likes and *have* to learn it," she says. "I remember when I was a teenager the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* came out, and he just decided he was gonna learn how to play the banjo and… *god*, all the siblings, I just remember us being like, 'Durrghhh!' Ha ha ha! It was *hours* of loud banjo, we were always asking him to go play outside!"

Guests at the Lee household were entertained by the family, cajoled by their father into giving performances of Beatles and Neil Young classics, among others. "It was so dorky and embarrassing!" she guffaws, before pausing. "But I look at the pictures and look back on it and it was so precious."

"I HAVE ALWAYS KEPT MY DOLLS AS MASCOTS"

AMY LEE

Understandably, Robby's death brought it all home in a major way. "It changes you," she says, "it really does, when you lose someone that you love so much. It's not something that heals, it's not something you get over. It's a part of you now. You have to learn to live with the new you. A big part of who I am is being a big sister and having him in my life, that's just part of my identity. So to have to look at this big part of yourself and go, 'OK, that part of me is gone… or is it gone, and what does that mean?'"

It's not the first time she's had to grieve the death of a sibling. Amy's sister Bonnie died suddenly at the age of three, which she poured into early Evanescence tracks. The loss of Robby in adulthood, however, has been a different thing to process. "We had a life together," she explains. "We knew each other for years. He's part of who I've been since I was 12 years old."

She tells us it's brought her family closer. Playing the album to her parents, over Christmas, was a powerful moment. "I just took 'em out here and we listened to the whole thing. It felt really good to do. There were a few tears shed."

At this point, she's ready for life as we knew it to restart. Ready for shows, travel, seeing her fans and, erm, guacamole competitions on tour. "I'm a purist! Mine is totally smooth and it doesn't have tomatoes or onions or anything chunky going on…"

She chatters on about her recipe, painting a cheerfully everyday picture of life in a world-conquering metal band – far removed from the epic sounds and luxury production values she's known for, and from the heartbreak that shaped *The Bitter Truth*.

With nothing to prove as she concludes her 30s, and a thirst for the next chapter (whatever that might be) Amy Lee could do anything. She might surprise all of us. "Time is short and important," she says thoughtfully, "and you think about your life and the things that are really important, and sometimes it's a really hard choice, because we have the opportunity to do something so amazing, and yet at the same time… how incredibly amazing is it to have a family? How precious is that? So you have to weigh your time."

***THE BITTER TRUTH* IS OUT NOW VIA BMG**

TRUTH TO POWER

Nick Raskulinecz, the production guru behind 2011's *Evanescence*, reveals the secrets behind *The Bitter Truth*…

HAD YOU MET THE BAND BEFORE YOU PRODUCED THEIR SELF-TITLED RECORD IN 2011?
"I hadn't. I'd never even seen Evanescence play live. I was familiar with their music on the radio and stuff like that, but when I met Amy for the first time we just really hit it off; we had a lot in common musically and it was like, 'Well shit, you're cool, let's hear what you got!' So we listened to the demos and I was like, 'Fuck, this is great!' Amy's got really eclectic taste."

THERE'S A LOT GOING ON IN *THE BITTER TRUTH* (ELECTRONICS, KEYS, ORCHESTRAL LAYERS…). DO YOU ENJOY THE CHALLENGE OF PULLING SO MANY ELEMENTS TOGETHER?
"Oh definitely. I love music and I love creating with people who aren't afraid to try things they've never done before. That's the cool thing about working with someone like Amy; she's not afraid to try anything, man. This record is a good blend of electronic and beautiful and vibey, and it's got some of the heaviest most rocking shit she's ever done."

WHAT WAS THE MOOD IN THE STUDIO LIKE, AFTER A 10-YEAR BREAK?
"It felt like we took a month off, or something. I remember all of us going, at various points, 'It feels like we never stopped!' That energy and that creativity was still there. To be honest with you, I had no idea if we were gonna make another record again. I really didn't. I didn't know where her head was at."

DO YOU HAVE A FAVOURITE TRACK ON THE ALBUM?
"I love *Better Without You*; it's a perfect example of her [Amy] taking a chance. She's got an undeniable sound, she's a career artist. You know it's Evanescence before she even starts to sing, like with the Foo Fighters, Korn, Alice in Chains, Rush… Those are all career bands. They make records for their fans, not the radio."

GETTY

Amy Lee: nothing to prove

LG PETROV

LG PETROV WAS THE ULTIMATE METALHEAD

Entombed's legendary frontman tragically passed away this year. In March, we paid tribute to his incredible legacy

WORDS: DOM LAWSON

PRESS/MACIEJ PIELOCH

LG PETROV

Legendary death metal vocalist Lars-Göran Petrov passed away on March 7, 2021, after a brutal battle with cancer. If anyone needs proof that the Swede's contribution to our world was colossal and enduring, one need only direct their attention to the avalanche of effusive and affectionate tributes that instantly poured onto the internet. Best known as frontman with Stockholm legends Entombed, LG had been a relentless and much-loved presence on the global metal touring circuit, crossing paths with bands and musicians from myriad points along the heaviness spectrum. He was, without doubt, the life and soul of many unforgettable, booze-sodden parties, and everyone from Machine Head's Robb Flynn to Opeth's Mikael Åkerfeldt have spoken fondly about the amazing times they had with him and their admiration for the music he made. Quite frankly, you don't have to dig deep to discover that everybody loved LG.

If one thing defined LG Petrov's career in music, it was his unwavering and intense enthusiasm for heavy metal. He began his career in a handful of amateurish teenage bands, before becoming the drummer in nascent Swedish black metallers Morbid (from whom Norwegian legends Mayhem procured ill-fated vocalist Dead in 1988). Meanwhile, something unique was stirring in the Stockholm underground. Death metal was well-established as a unique genre by the end of the 80s, with its most influential bands nearly all hailing from the US. That all changed with the formation of Nihilist, featuring LG on vocals, and their contemporaries Dismember, Unleashed and Grave.

Swedish death metal was aggressive, dark and heavy like its American forebear, but the sound these bands were making was markedly different, insanely exciting and pretty fucking cool. In particular, Nihilist were a jolting dose of pure adrenaline, with a raging punk vibe, loads of irresistibly nasty hooks and a guitar sound (courtesy of the now legendary HM-2 pedal) that threatened to scythe through your walls and take your head off. Nihilist changed their name to Entombed in 1989 and released their debut album, *Left Hand Path*, the following year. Its impact was colossal and undeniable. With LG bellowing charismatically throughout, the album noisily defined the Swedish death metal sound in the ears of the world, hurling open the gates for a generation of Scandinavian bands in the process.

Entombed: legends of the Scandinavian death metal scene

Absent from Entombed's classic second album, *Clandestine*, LG Petrov contributed vocals to Stockholm crew Comecon's *Megatrends In Brutality* album in 1991, but was back and where he belonged for the Swedes' seminal and ground-breaking third album, *Wolverine Blues* (1993). Another milestone in metal's evolution, the album single-handedly invented the concept of death'n'roll, via the likes of *Hollowman* and *Out Of Hand*: songs that provided LG with the perfect backdrop for his infernal yelling and Lemmy-gone-feral rasp. Entombed were always fond of recording cover versions, too, and one in particular stands out from that era. Listen to their version of Kiss's *God Of Thunder* and hear LG in his absolute element, out demon-ing Gene Simmons with ease and – we must assume – grinning from ear to ear.

People talk a lot of bollocks about metal's frailty in the 90s. In fact, as ever, lots of exciting things were happening in the underground, and Entombed were among the most inventive bands around. Their fourth album, *To Ride, Shoot Straight And Speak The Truth* (1997), marched even further away from traditional death metal, embracing all manner of eclectic influences along the way.

A year later, they released *Same Difference*, an album that jettisoned nearly all traces of old-school metal and veered into bludgeoning noise rock and grunge-punk territory. Although many viewed the record as a misstep, it remained in keeping with Entombed's ethos and showcased LG's ability to sound at home in any number of thunderous sonic environments.

Returning to a more familiar death'n'roll attack for their first 21st-century album, *Uprising* (2000), Entombed became less creatively restless and more focused towards the end of their first chapter. As inarguable death metal legends, their shows were increasingly celebratory, too; not least due to the sheer number of cast-iron anthems the band had penned over the years. It also helped that LG Petrov was an absolutely phenomenal frontman, with a gift for ensuring that everyone in the room, theatre or field had a loud, beery and cheerfully obnoxious night to remember.

Not every musician wants to spend huge amounts of time on the road, but LG Petrov visibly enjoyed every second of the touring life. Sadly, he parted ways with Entombed in 2013, citing frustration at the band's lack of live activity as a principal motivation. With a confusing dispute over the rights to use the band's name, LG unveiled his own crew, Entombed A.D., in 2014.

Although dedicated to writing their own music from the start, the new band

PRESS.

LG continued having the time of his life with Entombed A.D.

LG Petrov: a force to be reckoned with onstage; nicest bloke ever offstage

were also custom-designed to get out on the road and play Entombed songs to the fans that had supported his band for all those years. They released their debut album, *Back To The Front*, in August 2014 and hit the road like men possessed, serving up the timeless likes of *Stranger Aeons*, *Wolverine Blues* and *Chief Rebel Angel* alongside their own new songs at festivals across Europe. As ever, LG seemed to be having the time of his life.

However, he wasn't content with just one kick-ass death metal band. Also formed in 2014, Firespawn sounded nothing like Entombed A.D., eschewing the latter's death'n'roll swagger for a pitch-black, super-technical take on the old school. The band's debut album, *Shadow Realms*, emerged in 2015: another magnificent showcase for LG's none-more-classic death metal vocals and warped, witty lyrics. In particular, *Lucifer Has Spoken* was a glorious example of LG's incendiary charms: as he roars lines such as *'The son of black dawn will rise up his throne / Deep down in the pits of darkness unknown...'* amid a swirling storm of gruesome riffing, he truly sounds like the master of ceremonies at the end of the world.

In recent years, LG was a remorseless force for heavy metal good. Entombed A.D. have continued to grow in stature and popularity: their 2019 album *Bowels Of Earth* was widely praised as the band's finest and a welcome return to classic, old-school deathly purity. Meanwhile, Firespawn have released a further two albums and cemented their reputation as major death metal heavyweights. For LG himself, the opportunity to make music and tour the world was one that he never took for granted.

HE WAS THE LIFE AND SOUL OF MANY UNFORGETTABLE PARTIES

"We just get out there and tour and then we'll make another new album," he told this writer in 2019. "It never ends! We all enjoy it a lot. When we meet up in the cab to the airport and have a few beers, we are a happy bunch of guys!"

Much to the dismay of the entire metal world, LG's cancer diagnosis became public knowledge last summer ("It's just very, very bad luck," he told *Hammer*. "Cancer doesn't have feelings. It's just maximum bad luck."). It is always tragic when anyone is struck down with such a useless and nasty disease, but somehow it's even more so when that person is so gloriously full of life and love for his fellow man. LG was a true heavy metal diehard, one of the greatest death metal vocalists of all time and the voice of countless immortal classics, but it's obvious from every tribute to this fallen hero that his greatest gift to the world was to bring a big, shit-eating grin to the face of everyone who met him. He was a real deal, balls-to-the-wall God Of Thunder, admired by his peers and loved by all.

"We are devastated to announce that our beloved friend Lars-Göran Petrov has left us," LG's Entombed A.D. bandmates said in a statement. "Our brother, leader, vocalist, our Chief Rebel Angel went on another ride last night. It's with the deepest sadness that we have to announce that Lars-Göran Petrov has left us.

"He was (is!!!) an incredible friend, and a person that has touched so many people. He has changed so many lives with his voice, his music, his character and his unique personality. LG's smile is something that we will carry forever in our hearts. When asked in an interview what he would like to have written on his grave about his legacy, he said 'I will never die, it will never die.' And you didn't. You will live forever in our hearts."

LIVE: KEVIN NIXON. PRESS/NICLAS BRUNZELL.

GOJIRA ARE THE BAND OF THE DECADE...

...we said it back in April for this cover feature, and we still believe it now! Here's what happened when we caught up with the Duplantiers for a very special interview

WORDS: ELEANOR GOODMAN • PICTURES: GABRIELLE DUPLANTIER

GOJIRA

Joe and Mario Duplantier were working on Gojira's seventh album, *Fortitude*, in the autumn of 2019, when the news hit the headlines: the Amazon was on fire. Not just a small, natural fire, but acres upon acres set ablaze by land-grabbing farmers and loggers, killing wildlife and endangering tribes across not only Brazil, but other South American countries.

Most people are so numb to the 24-hour news cycle that they'd see the story and move on. Not the Duplantier brothers.

On that same day, sick to their stomachs, they took to their instruments and played with white-hot rage. The result was recent single *Amazonia*, a groove metal anthem driven by a jaw harp, augmented by throat singing and inspired by the tribal percussive barrage of *Roots*-era Sepultura. *'The greatest miracle is burning to the ground!'* cries Joe.

But it wasn't enough to write a song about the Amazon crisis; they wanted to *do* something about it, too. Frontman Joe made phone call after phone call looking for advice on how to help, and met with indigenous leaders, before the band launched an online auction and released a limited-edition art print to raise money for an NGO, The Articulation Of Indigenous Peoples Of Brazil (APIB).

"It was very, very emotional and intense to talk to these people. I was shaking," remembers Joe, speaking to us via a video call. "It was on *Zoom*. The indigenous people have to use modern tools now to communicate on their situation, and to protect themselves against criminal attacks, gunshots and fires."

It's a story that sets Gojira apart from every other metal band. They took a feeling of powerlessness and not only turned it into brilliant, angry music, but decisive action. It feels like they're striving to figure out the purpose of their lives, and leave the world in a better place than they found it.

Gojira are the first band in years to challenge metal's old guard. Not by using gimmicks, like Slipknot's masks, Sabaton's tanks or Ghost's popes, but simply by being themselves. Their unfiltered hopes and fears about living and dying blast urgently out of the music, empowering you to confront them yourself. Metallica's Kirk Hammett called their last album, 2016's *Magma*, "an incredible piece of art".

They've inspired awe in the next generation, too. Ex-Black Peaks frontman Will Gardner has been a fan since hearing 2005's crushing *From Mars To Sirius*: "What really got me into them in the first place was they have a uniquely powerful but deeply emotive sound – their music can be insanely heavy or super-technical, but there's humanity at the core of it."

Now they're about to release *Fortitude* – a stunning album that values the potency of meditative chanting as much as cathartic blastbeats. Like a supporter on the sidelines of a marathon, they urge people to bear up, push past obstacles and realise their potential. Gojira are more than just the band metal needs right now. They're actually the band the whole planet needs right now.

Gojira aren't your typical celebrities, and they know it. Joe is first to join today's video call, while younger brother/drummer Mario keeps us waiting. "He's such a rock star," quips Joe, before phoning France's mild-mannered answer to Axl Rose to see where he is.

They will never have stories about sex, drugs and rock'n'roll, but they're interesting precisely because they don't put up a front; they are their authentic selves. Modest but self-possessed, Joe takes the lead and is first to answer questions directed at them both, while Mario shades in the colour of forgotten details.

"WE HAD A FASCINATION FOR BLOODY THINGS AND DEATH"

JOE DUPLANTIER

The pair formed Godzilla in France in 1996, when Joe was 19 and Mario was just 14. Fired up by the gruesome death metal they heard blasting out of the US underground, they wanted to make music that measured up to their heroes' standards. *Brutal Abortion*, *Rigor Mortis* and *Bleeding* are some of the song titles on Gojira's four early demos.

"We were collectively in that energy, listening to a lot of Morbid Angel and Cannibal Corpse and Death, and we had this absolute fascination for this world:

The brothers Duplantier, the heart of Gojira

music that would talk about bloody things and death, and ghosts and fear. It was almost like trying to understand the rules of a game; we were trying to fit, in that world, for a little bit. But then very quickly, we understood how we could create our own world by breaking these limits," explains Joe. "Mario was taking it super, super-seriously. He had long hair…"

"…Yeah, my dream was just to be in Tampa, Florida," enthuses Mario, "and going to the Morrisound Studio [where Morbid Angel, Cannibal Corpse and Death recorded seminal albums], because all the production that came from that studio was amazing."

Released in 2001, debut album *Terra Incognita* marked that shift into their own world. By this time they had swapped original bassist Alexandre Cornillon for Jean-Michel Labadie, changed their name to Gojira, and were merrily subverting death metal's tropes. Bludgeoning opener *Clone* featured clean singing and warned against interfering with Mother Nature. Instrumentals foregrounded primitive percussion and yelling. There was even a song called *Love*.

"We sort of had an epiphany," says Joe. "And we realised, 'OK, it's OK to call a song *Love*.' It's about love, it's death metal, but it works, actually, because love is freaking *powerful*, and can also be destructive. And so we got rid of all the notions of what is acceptable or unacceptable in our music pretty early on."

Exploring existential themes, each record includes passages, interludes or short songs that complement the onslaught: unexpected sounds in the gaps of their death metal vertebrae. Yet *The Chant*, from new album *Fortitude*, still comes as a surprise. A quasi-dub rock song punctuated by a laid-back vocal refrain, it's further than they've ever gone before.

"*The Chant* expresses our intention that we put behind every song, which is an intention of unifying and compassion, and this chant is clearly a mantra or a prayer addressed to the sky, or addressed to the Unknown, or whatever the universe is," explains Joe. "It's very indigenous, in a way. And we have something indigenous in our music."

Where does that indigenous quality come from?

"I don't know," he admits. "I think we were taught, through example, by our parents, to think outside the box. We had an Azorean, American mom that lived in France who was a yoga teacher, who was speaking differently to all the other moms in the village, with a different accent. She was very ▶

loud and outspoken. Our dad didn't talk much, but he was teaching by example with a lot of hard work."

Mario describes their dad, Dominique Duplantier, as a "typical French artist," who's grumpy, smart, sarcastic and fascinating. Mario's friends were scared of him – and later, so was Joe's wife ("The first time she saw him, she literally ran away. It was so funny!"). They good-naturedly point to his brief, stony-faced appearance halfway through the *To Sirius* video as evidence of why. He's not interested in metal, but nevertheless borrowed money from the bank to fund Gojira's first studio, at home, and even helped with the heavy lifting of construction.

In their secluded old house at the end of a hidden, bumpy road, the Duplantier family, which also included middle sibling Gabby, listened to world music, country music and African percussion. When the brothers began Gojira, there was no local metal scene, so they were on their own, obsessed with the aforementioned death metal bands across the Atlantic and inspired by Sepultura's percussion on *Chaos A.D.* and *Roots*.

Ever curious, ever questioning, Joe still hasn't worked out why they gravitated towards heavy music above all the other genres they'd been exposed to. "The mystery is, why did we get fascinated with metal in the first place?" he wonders. "But I'm not that surprised that we started to incorporate other elements early on."

Before Godzilla or Gojira, there was just Joe and Mario. In Ondres on France's southwest coast, population circa 4,000, most people were into surfing, hunting, trekking and going to the mountains and the beach. The Duplantier brothers, with their multicultural parents, loved the arts and messing about in the forest. They were outsiders. "People used to call us The Addams Family," says Joe.

School was not a happy place for Joe. Bullies would pin him against the wall, chuck wads of wet toilet paper at him, and tease him for having hand-me-down clothes. "I didn't like going to school at all. I found people very cruel. Someone who's your friend one day is not your friend the other day… I guess I was too sensitive," he says dismissively.

Five years younger, Mario found it easier and gelled better with his peers because he played tennis, but he remembers Joe as an introspective teenager who was captivated by thoughts of what lay beyond the village borders. "He was always fascinated by

Christian Andreu: rhythm guitar god

Gojira are guaranteed to melt your face off live

GOJIRA LIVE: GETTY. RANDY BLYTHE: PRESS/TRAVIS SHINN

New York, for example, or baseball," he recalls. "So I was more into the local concrete reality, and Joe was already travelling through his mind."

"Yeah, maybe it was something unconscious; maybe I was intrigued by where our mum hailed from," reasons Joe.

Their mum, Patricia Rosa, would tell Joe stories about her own schooldays in The Land Of The Free, where the creative arts were prized. In Joe's school, they only had an hour of music tuition a week and were forced to play the flute. In her school, they were encouraged to try trumpet, cello, violin and guitar.

"I was also intrigued by the mood that she was describing, and that she had herself. A very positive outlook on everything, full of energy," he explains. "We were in a small town, too, so somehow I had dreams of change and escape."

Those dreams came true at the age of 13, when Joe flew to the US for the first time, to visit family in Pennsylvania, near the capital of Harrisburg. At the airport, he and his cousin were greeted by his maternal uncle, and the sights they saw through the car windows, of looming skyscrapers and bustling crowds, were a welcome culture shock after the parochial environs of Ondres.

"He picked us up and drove us through New York, Manhattan, and Harlem and Brooklyn. My mind was blown, to see people rapping in the street, and all these different outfits and different skin colours, all these different communities. Fascinating, for a young kid that's been dreaming," Joe enthuses, his voice quickening. "And my dad told me, 'You'll see, you'll go to New York, and you're gonna come back and you're gonna forget about it. It's crazy over there, it's all grey and polluted, and there's too many cars.' And I came back, and I was on *fire*. 'I wanna live there!'"

"PEOPLE CALLED US THE ADDAMS FAMILY"

JOE DUPLANTIER

"When Joe came back after one month, he was another person," says Mario, turning to his brother. "The impact of this travel was huge for your life. You gained confidence, you felt better in your mind and body, I almost didn't recognise you. You looked great!"

Joe's American dream faded into the background as he became more politically aware, but after Gojira formed and gained a following, it began to return. Rather than waiting for a record company there to pick them up, they got themselves on a US tour with Amon Amarth and Children Of

"THE BAR HAS JUST BEEN RAISED. AGAIN"

We asked Lamb Of God's Randy Blythe, one of Gojira's earliest champions, to deliver his verdict on *Fortitude*

"*Fortitude*, Gojira's seventh studio offering, succeeds in achieving what very few metal albums do: without sacrificing a single ounce of earth-shattering heaviness (do I really even need to write that? You're reading *Hammer*, so it's a pretty fair guess you already know Gojira are *fucking heavy*), the album moves beyond the often self-imposed constraints of the genre into something entirely else. The palette of heavy metal is used to construct something *more* than metal: a gorgeous, dense, sonic painting of life itself.

"On the southwest coast of France, bordered on one side by the sea and the Pyrenees on the other, sits the tiny village of Ondres. There, down a tree-lined lane cut through a beautiful forest, is an ancient farmhouse filed with art. Behind that is an equally ancient stone barn filled with Gojira's musical equipment.

"One day, 13 years ago, we left the house and barn in the forest and drove high into the Pyrenees to walk the hillsides and wander the Basque villages – the region is one of indescribable beauty. After hours of clearing our heads in the crisp mountain air, the sun began to set and we headed back down towards the coast. Suddenly, Joe skidded over to the side of the treacherous dirt road we drove on, hopped out of our car, ran up to a tree, grabbed a handful of ripe cherries from its branches, and ran back, laughing hysterically. 'We gotta get outta here quick before the farmer who owns that tree shoots us!' he said, and we hauled ass down the mountain and to the sea, stuffing our faces with that delicious fruit the whole way...

"That is what *Fortitude* sounds like – ancient structures holding new art, ocean waves and mountain air, the thrill of illicit fruit as the sun sets at the end of a perfect day. Maybe you can envision that. Maybe not. It doesn't really matter, because the bar that defines this genre has just been raised. Again."

Bodom in 2006. It was Mario's turn to freak out about the diversity and scale of the cities. "The first day I arrived, I was *truly* amazed. Joe had the first shock when he went at 13, my first shock was at 25 years old!"

It was 2011 when Joe eventually relocated to New York. Mario joined him later, and in 2014 they constructed a new headquarters, Silver Cord Studio. He's still trying to figure out *why* he went ahead and emigrated. All he knows is that it felt right.

"When I finally moved to the States, I felt something was really working for me. A certain energy," he explains. "I'm glad to experience both. The European side, and a French education, and some subtleties, and the idea of the Republic and the Revolution – it's really deep in the French culture. And in America there's the notion of the New World, and things need to be loud, and fun, and big. I know there's a lot of judgement from Europeans for the Americans, sometimes. Because they want everything large. But there's something interesting and *freeing* in [all of] this."

Queens, New York. 2015. Gojira are jamming out the first song at Silver Cord. They name it *Silvera* – a ceremonious working title that sticks. Over the ensuing months, they write and record the rest of the album that will become *Magma*, a process that's disrupted by the death of Joe and Mario's mum, Patricia Rosa. Made with sadness and pain, it nevertheless expresses the joy they feel to be her sons. "Somehow her spirit is still around with us," Joe told us.

Magma is released in June 2016, and connects with people like no other Gojira record. "It's a very intimate and personal album, and I think the closer you get to your emotions, and the more honest you are, the closer to people you become," Joe says. "It sounds almost like a paradox, but the more internal you are when you write a song, the deeper it's gonna affect people. *Magma* has something like that."

Later that year, they score a Grammy nomination for Best Rock Album, while *Silvera* is nominated for Best Metal Performance. In 2018, they triumphantly headline Bloodstock festival. To the outside world, *Magma* is a huge step up, but to Gojira it's all part of the career they've been forging for years.

"People see the jump: 'Oh my god, Gojira headlining on *Magma* is huge!', but for us it was a lot of hard work to get there. And unless we screwed up that album big time, we were gonna get there eventually," smiles Joe. "So for us, *Magma* was another good step forward, and there's all these things that unfolded. But it's a combination of all these albums, I think. Maybe I don't realise how much these two songs, *Stranded* and *Silvera*, did also."

"I would say these two songs made a huge difference, because they were maybe more accessible, more well structured, with stronger choruses," adds Mario.

"Yeah, probably. We changed our format a little. It became songs, when before they were epic tracks of metal, with a journey. But *Fortitude* is gonna smash *Magma*, just so you know!"

Joe grins. He knows it's a cliché parroted by metal frontmen, but he means it. Less heart-on-sleeve than *Magma*, but a refined iteration of everything they've been working on for the past 25 years, it's *crushing*. The songs are concise – coming in, melting your face, taking their leave.

Propulsive opener *Born For One Thing* unsettlingly stares death in the face, Joe growling from a primal place. *Hold On* opens with a vulnerable vocal harmony that would be perfectly at home on a Wardruna album, before descending into a sonic maelstrom that matches the *'ocean of stress'* they're urging us to fight. That familiar pick-scraping trick opens *New Found*, a classic Gojira rager designed for bellowing across a headbanging crowd enveloped in dry ice. The towering *Sphinx* and *Into The Storm* are nothing short of epic.

"*FORTITUDE* IS GONNA SMASH *MAGMA*!"
JOE DUPLANTIER

They considered the production more seriously than ever, holding auditions for the perfect drum tech, and bringing in the legendary Andy Wallace on mixing, who not only worked on landmark albums such as Slayer's *Reign In Blood* and System Of A Down's *Toxicity*, but their beloved *Chaos A.D.* and *Roots*. No wonder *Amazonia* sounds so earth-shattering.

It's the song we talk about most today, as it's clearly at the forefront of their minds. Due to political and police corruption, the situation for the indigenous people is desperate and ongoing.

"There's a rate of suicide happening, I've been talking to people that are wearing bulletproof vests, sending their children away because they're scared for their lives. So it's pretty dramatic," says Joe. "We're hoping to communicate on that and really try to help, because our music represents that. It's the strength of the forest; the force you find in nature is influencing us. Volcanos, waves and giant trees. So we almost have a responsibility to honour and protect it."

For Joe Duplantier, Gojira is more than just a band. It's more, even, than a vehicle to get across the urgent messages which underpin their music. "It's a philosophical sort of quest," he says. "Why are we here, what can we do to feel better in our shoes on an everyday basis? And it's about our fears of dying, our fears of living, or breaking the boundaries, or finding one's self. It's therapeutic."

But if Joe needs the band he has spent the last 25 years building, then the world needs them even more right now. If *Fortitude* feels like an important album, that's because it is. It arrives at a tipping point – a moment when the world feels on the brink of toppling into chaos – and provides both a lifeline and a rallying call for their fans; if a band from an obscure French backwater can achieve this much through focus, perseverance and sheer force of will, then you can too.

Gojira embody a sea change in metal too. The old clichés – sex, drugs and the rest of it – are thankfully dying out. The scene is looking outwards as well as inwards, acknowledging the existential crisis every one of us faces as the planet heads towards political, personal and environmental ruin. With *Fortitude*, Gojira have delivered the perfect soundtrack – one that calls on everybody to pull together to get us out of this mess.

"You just ask yourself what you want to be in this life, what you want to achieve," says Mario Duplantier. "Words are great, music is great, but action is something concrete."

The Gojira that made *Fortitude* may feel like a different beast to the Gojira that made *Terra Incognita* or *From Mars To Sirius*, but it's just the wrapper that has changed. Scratch the surface and you can still see the death metal fans beneath. "It's in our DNA," says Joe Duplantier. "Some people like to climb cliffs or fly kites… we like to melt faces."

FORTITUDE IS OUT NOW VIA ROADRUNNER RECORDS. FOR THE LATEST ON GOJIRA'S FUNDRAISING INITIATIVES, GO TO WWW.GOJIRA-MUSIC.COM. FOR MORE ON APIB, SEE HTTPS://APIBOFICIAL.ORG

Jean-Michel Labadie: appropriately, he grew up in the French Bas(s)que Country

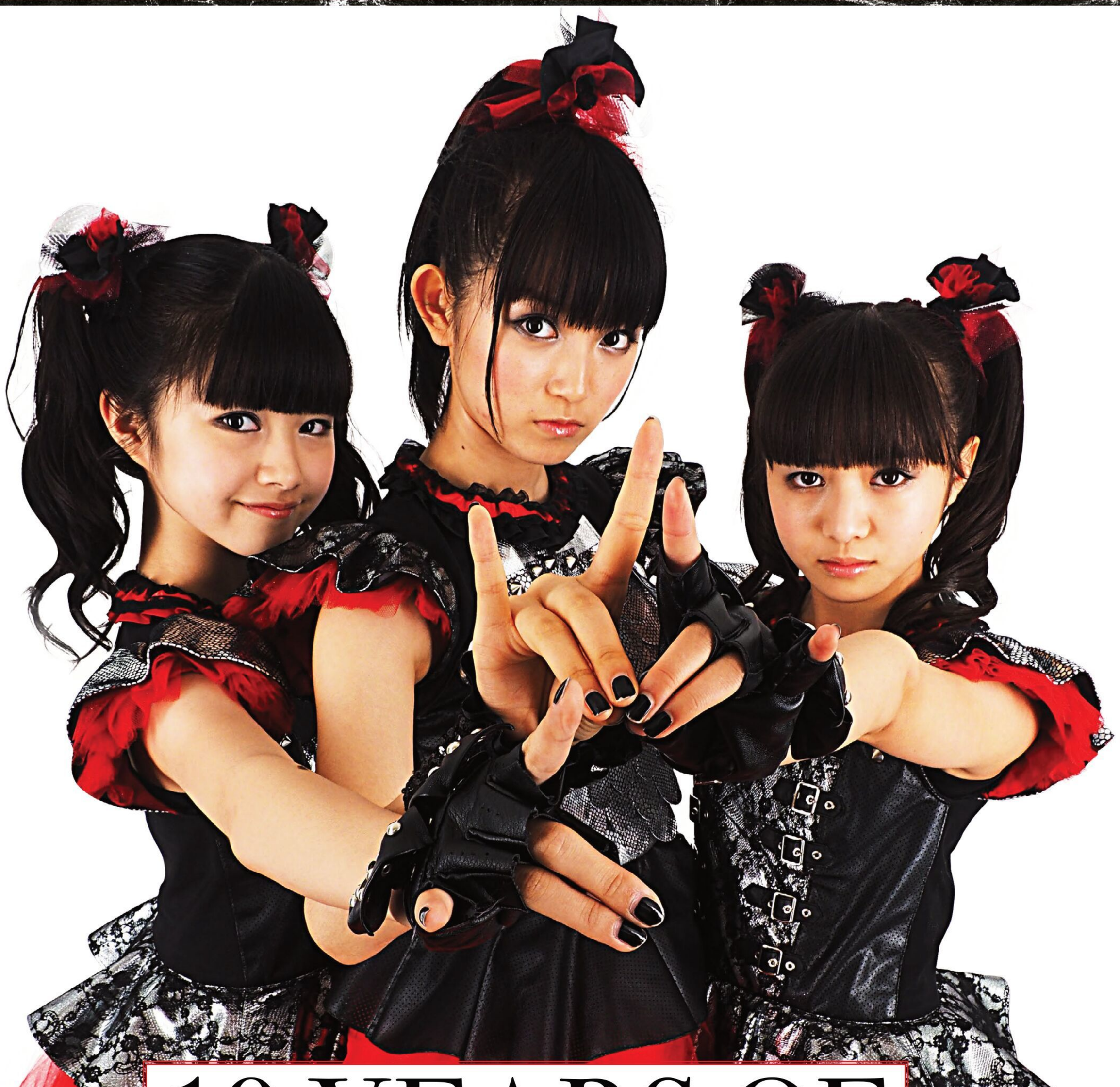
NIGHT VISION

Joe and Mario spent three weeks working on two songs that didn't make the cut for *Fortitude*. Joe tells us about one we can expect to hear in the future

WHAT'S THE WORKING TITLE OF THE SONG?
"The Night Shift. It's about all the things that take over when it's night time. So fears, demons and ghosts and nightmares that work together to shake our unconsciousness, you know? And the role that these things play in our lives. They also inspire us a great deal for our death metal music."

WHAT DOES IT SOUND LIKE?
"It was a very subtle riff... it's a bit of an ambitious song, so I feel it has a future. I think it's going to come back. It often works like that – sometimes we have super-interesting riffs, pouring out of us, and we're like, 'Oh my god, this is so cool!' but until we find the right partner to that riff... I remember a conversation with Brent [Hinds] from Mastodon. He was talking about that process of finding interesting chord progressions and he said, 'You know, I find a riff, and then I play for hours to find that riff's best friend', and it's a little bit like that that we're thinking about songwriting."

WHAT'S THE SONGWRITING PROCESS LIKE?
"Sometimes you have one strong idea. Until you find the riff that's going to complement this, and find a balance, then it's doable to make a song. But if you don't find that best friend, or that right combination, it's best to wait. Because sometimes a good riff can be hurt by a not-so-good companion."



10 YEARS OF BABYMETAL

In April, Babymetal played the last of 10 spectacular shows at Tokyo's iconic Budokan venue. The gigs were played in honour of the band's 10th anniversary, and to celebrate, we put together the ultimate look inside Babymetal's rollercoaster career the following month, from their earliest days as a J-pop teenie off-shoot to their unprecedented rise through the music industry. With the band now on hiatus, it seems only the Fox God knows what comes next, but one thing's for sure: it's been a wild ride so far. Here's the full story of a metal phenomenon.

I: IN THE BEGINNING

Four years before Babymetal stunned the world with *Gimme Chocolate!!*, the seeds of a legend were being sown

WORDS: STEPHEN HILL • TRANSLATOR/INTERPRETER: AYAKO UEDA

"Metal is only getting older and older. I wanted to do something new, something no one has ever done before," Babymetal mastermind Key Kobayashi told us back in 2014. "The idea just fell from the heavens."

Whether inspired by angels or not, it's fair to say he succeeded in his goal of revolutionising metal. A decade on from their inception, Babymetal's mix of hyperactive J-pop, brutal riffs and heavy metal bombast has seen them sell out arenas, stun major festivals, conquer the mainstream, befriend legends of the genre and make some members of *Hammer*'s Facebook page throw proper toddler tantrums.

None of us saw it coming. So, how did it happen? We're told that 'only the Fox God knows'. Well Foxy, we've waited long enough – it's time to spill the beans. This is the story of how Babymetal became heavy metal royalty.

The year is 2010. Japanese talent agency Amuse Inc. have formed a school-themed idol group named Sakura Gakuin. Its line-up features 10-12 rolling members, all aged between 10 and 15, with their own principal and teacher. The bandmembers, or 'students', are divided into a series of sub-units to celebrate a series of extracurricular activities, such as the 'Cooking Club', 'Newspaper Club' and something called the 'Go Home Club'. Which is, you know, not really that metal.

One of these sub-units, named 'The Heavy Music Club', has been devised and produced by the aforementioned Key Kobayashi, soon to be known to you and I as Kobametal. It is comprised of three members: Suzuka, Yui and Moa, who will become known as Su-Metal, Yuimetal and Moametal. It's probably safe to say this isn't how bands like Anthrax formed.

"I thought this amalgam of J-pop and metal would be a good way to represent Japanese metal and Japanese music," Kobametal told us.

Soon, The Heavy Music Club began to perform songs at Sakura Gakuin concerts. Journalist Yuka Okubo was the editor of a magazine called *CD Data*, and was following the idol scene intently at the time.

"I'd met the girls in Babymetal and had been following them closely before they were in the band," she tells us. "I saw them in 2010 with Sakura Gakuin and they came on at the end as Babymetal. I honestly just thought that it was really cute, and it was very different to the usual Japanese idol groups, but I had no idea it was going to become something this big."

The rule of Sakura Gakuin is that, just as with school, members have to graduate and leave the band. At one of the final shows as members of the idol act, Babymetal as we now know them were presented to the world.

"They'd been doing this style with a backing track," remembers Yuka. "But I saw the band at Shibuya O-East in 2012, and during the encore they brought the full Kami Band on with them. It's here where we realised, 'Oh, they are actually going to be going forward with this style.' It was clear they were serious about it."

By then, Babymetal had released a handful of songs. *Doki Doki * Morning* appeared on Sakura Gakuin's debut album, *Sakura Gakuin 2010 Nendo: Message*; they put out a split single with death pop band Kiba Of Akiba; and their first solo single was *Headbanger!!*. This earned them a place on the bill of Japan's prestigious Summer Sonic Festival in Chiba and Osaka that summer, alongside Green Day, Rihanna and New Order. They were the youngest-ever act in the festival's history – but that didn't mean they were welcomed with open arms.

"At first everyone just recognised them as this cute Japanese girl band," Yuka says. "They were always in that category, but they wanted to get out. They couldn't, because no one admitted they were a real band. When they started to play more rock and metal festivals, things started to change, but they told me that back then they felt like they weren't accepted."

As the year progressed, Babymetal began to transition out of teen magazines and into Japan's rock press. They played Summer Sonic again in 2013, as well as the Loud Park festival in Saitama Super Arena, and released a video promoting Metallica's *Through The Never* movie to be shown at a special event. Their debut album was released on February 26, 2014, peaking at No.2 in the Japanese Billboard charts, and in March they were booked to play two nights at Tokyo's legendary Budokan, to a total of around 28,000 fans.

"That was the moment I knew they were going to become really big," says Yuka. "On one of the nights, Yui actually fell off of the stage, but she got up and carried on performing. The other two really supported her through that as well; you could see something had changed, I could see the determination in them."

Despite this, the Japanese metal fraternity still viewed Babymetal with suspicion. But, 5,845 miles away, in the country that invented heavy metal, something was stirring.

If there's one thing that's bound to attract attention on the internet, it's cat videos. If there's another thing that's bound to attract attention on the internet, it's uploading something bizarre, confusing and unique. At the start of 2014, Babymetal delivered a true 'WTF?' moment to the metal world – the video for *Gimme Chocolate!!*. It was the song, the moment. Suddenly, everyone you spoke to was asking you if you'd seen this… thing!

"I thought, 'This is mad! What the fuck is that?'" says Alan Day of promoter Kilimanjaro, who went on to book the band's first UK show.

"I saw the video and like most people thought, 'What the fuck is this?'. It seemed like this crazy novelty song, but I'd really never seen anything like it before," veteran music journalist Paul Brannigan tells us.

Tesseract guitarist James Monteith, who would play Sonisphere's main stage just before Babymetal's debut UK appearance in 2014, remembers: "Someone sent me the video and I thought…"

Let us guess: "What the fuck?"

"…This is pretty fucking stupid, really. I didn't get what they were doing, but I was weirdly fascinated by it."

Well, two out three isn't bad. But the point still stands: here in the UK, Babymetal had our attention.

MICK HUTSON

II: UK TAKEOVER

Following the success of *Gimme Chocolate!!*, Babymetal finally landed in the UK, and things were never the same again

WORDS: STEPHEN HILL

Gimme Chocolate!! becoming a legitimate phenomenon in the UK didn't escape the girls.

"We've received so many comments online from the UK, we're getting such a great response and we never expected it," Su-Metal told us in 2014, when *Metal Hammer* first spoke to the band. "It makes us feel like we're being accepted. It feels like a dream."

"When the rumours began to circulate that they were being embraced by other parts of the world, that's when it really changed in Japan," Yuka Okubo recalls. "People really wanted to see just how the UK fans were reacting to them."

Such was the interest surrounding Babymetal that the race was on to bring them to the UK. On July 5, 2014, Babymetal played their first UK set at Sonisphere, on the same bill as Iron Maiden, Deftones, Anthrax, Ghost and openers Tesseract.

"Straight away I had to find out who their manager was," promoter Alan Day tells us. "We managed to get hold of them and I booked them for Sonisphere and a date at the Kentish Town Forum [in London] just after the festival. Initially I had them playing the tent, but it soon became clear that it'd be dangerously packed if we did that. So, we managed to free up a slot on the main stage, and it's the biggest crowd I've ever seen for a set at one o'clock in the afternoon."

"I was packing down my gear after we'd played and I saw them getting prepared," says Tesseract's James Monteith. "They stood out like a sore thumb. These young girls dressed in these uniforms all next to a bunch of hairy old metalheads. Then I saw their guitarist [Mikio Fujioka], who has sadly passed away now, in his costume and facepaint, warming up. He was an incredible player. I just thought 'Well… you don't see that every day.'"

By the time Babymetal took to the stage, the field was packed with a mixture of converted zealots, curious cats and folded-armed sceptics. "Most people just had their jaws on the floor," laughs Alan. "They couldn't believe what they were seeing."

"I went to the front to find my family and watched the show. My son loved it – he actually forgot his dad even played that day," sighs an absolutely, definitely not bitter James.

Their performance was the weekend's biggest talking point – and it wasn't just fans who were in the grip of Babymetal fever. Pictures from the weekend of the girls alongside the likes of Kirk Hammett, Chino Moreno and Kerry King showed just how fascinated our genre had become with the band.

> **"IT WAS THE BIGGEST CROWD I'VE EVER SEEN FOR A 1PM SET"**
> ALAN DAY, SONISPHERE

"Sonisphere was an amazing experience," Su-Metal told us two days later at the Kentish Town Forum. "It was the first time we had played in front of such a huge audience."

One member of the crowd that day was earMUSIC MD Jonathan Green, who was suitably impressed by what he had seen. "I looked around and thought there was definitely something going on here," he

Babymetal: the UK didn't stand a chance!

JOHN McMURTRIE

Channelling the power of the Fox God

remembers. "The reaction from the crowd was pretty amazing. It felt like a moment."

EarMUSIC signed the band for the UK and Europe and released *Babymetal* on June 1, 2015. "We believed that it could be a significant moment in the progression of global metal," remembers Jonathan.

If Sonisphere and the Forum could be written off as successes born from people's curiosity about this new type of idol-metal band, what came next proved they were no flash in the pan. On November 8, 2014, they played a sold-out, 5,000-capacity Brixton Academy.

"Usually, you book bands from different countries and people from those countries turn up to see them," says Alan Day. "I went to the Forum expecting to see a lot of Japanese music fans, but it was all British metalheads. That's when I thought it was definitely going to cross over – that's when I thought about getting them in for Brixton. We kept it exclusive – the only place you could see them was Brixton. And as more people clicked on *Gimme Chocolate!!* or heard *Megitsune*, the more the demand shot up and up."

But not everyone was convinced. Some hardened metalheads burst blood vessels over the thought that these teenage girls, these manufactured pop stars, were using metal as a gimmick. They didn't dress right! They smiled! They danced! Yuimetal (a 16-year-old, let's not forget) not only hadn't heard *Reek Of Putrefaction* by Carcass, she didn't even know they started as a grindcore band! DA FUQ?! Yet this frothy-mouthed outrage from supposed defenders of the faith only served to strengthen the girls' bond with their growing fanbase.

"The smart thing they did was never position themselves as dyed-in-the-wool metal fans," shrugs *Hammer* writer Paul Brannigan. "They were young girls who were taking their first steps into the genre."

"I HAD NO IDEA WHAT METAL MUSIC WAS"

YUIMETAL

"I would like more people to enjoy metal," Yuimetal told us in 2015. "To tell you the truth, when I joined Babymetal I had no idea what metal music was. But now I know what's great in metal, I've learned a lot from it."

While some were glad there was potential for metal to find an entirely new fanbase, some high-profile members of the metal community were starting to pull the drawbridge up on Babymetal.

"I made a decision that I personally, as the booker of the festival, don't believe they are right for the spirit of what Download's all about," Andy Copping told the *That's Not Metal* podcast in 2015.

But things started to turn when the festival rolled around later that year. *Metal Hammer* were with Babymetal all weekend when power metal legends Dragonforce, having already featured on new Babymetal track *Road Of Resistance*, and who are cheeky scamps at the best of times, decided to invite the band onstage during their Friday afternoon set and have an impromptu run through of *Gimme Chocolate!!*.

"Somehow word had got out that the girls were onsite," remembers Jonathan. "Once the rumour spread that they were going to be coming on with Dragonforce, let me tell you, that tent was packed. There were people outside fighting to get in."

"We knew they were coming over for the Golden Gods so we just thought it would be a fun thing to do," chuckles Herman Li. "I'll never forget the reaction to them walking out onstage. It was mania!"

Three days later, at *Metal Hammer*'s Golden God Awards in London, Babymetal picked up the Breakthrough award, before playing a brief set that brought every jaded, grizzled, veteran metal musician in the house that night from backstage to out front, to see their performance.

Eighteen months after hearing *Gimme Chocolate!!*, the UK was still enraptured by the band, far longer than the initial 15 minutes of fame people thought it would inspire. There was a growing suspicion that they weren't just one-hit wonders. But just how big could Babymetal become? MH

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III: GLOBAL CONQUEST

From hitting America to sharing stages with metal legends, the Babymetal hype train became a juggernaut

WORDS: STEPHEN HILL

Wembley Arena is one of the most prestigious venues on the planet. Not many metal bands get the chance to headline there and, when they do, it's usually after years of slogging away.

Iron Maiden first headlined it on their Seventh Tour Of A Seventh Tour in 1988, and two years later Metallica did the same while touring *...And Justice For All*. That's close to a decade a piece of hard work from metal's biggest bands. Babymetal sold it out on their third UK headline show.

The day before their triumphant Wembley gig is a date that every Babymetal fan now has marked on their calendar: April 1, AKA Fox Day. Ever since 2016, it's signalled some kind of celebration of the band. Back then, they released their second album, *Metal Resistance*. Receiving glowing reviews from the likes of *The Observer* to the metal press, with our own Dom Lawson calling it a 'Ludicrous but brilliantly executed delight' in his 8/10 review, it set the band up perfectly for a career-defining moment.

"It still doesn't feel real," Su-Metal told us when we caught up with the band in early 2016. "I know that Wembley Arena is a very legendary venue, so thinking about us playing there is a little unnerving."

Moametal wondered: "I'm not sure whether anyone will come."

She needn't have worried. The success of their debut album, the notoriety raised by playing Sonisphere, Download and 2015's Reading and Leeds festivals on the same day as Metallica – plus that little sprinkling of stardust – had created a perfect storm for the band.

"It's that old Kevin Costner thing," smiles earMUSIC's Jonathan Green. "If you build it, they will come. We really believed in the band, and our belief was rewarded."

When recalling April 2, 2016, promoter Alan Day still struggles to comprehend it.

"I turned up and I saw one of my merch guys running off to print new T-shirts because he'd run out," he recalls with an air of disbelief. "I'd never seen that before. Before the doors opened, they were running out of merch and having to go and print up new t-shirts... like... what? They broke the all-time record for merch sold at that venue in one night. I walked around the stalls at the end and there was nothing... not a single item anywhere. And it was the biggest headline show a Japanese artist had ever done in this country. Their third headline show... who does that?!"

"THEY BROKE WEMBLEY'S RECORD FOR MERCH SALES"

ALAN DAY

The praise wasn't just coming from the UK either; the US was starting to cast a beady eye on the band. Three days after Wembley, the band made their American television debut on prestigious talk show *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert*. "I'm not sure what I'm about to see, but I'm pretty excited about it," the host smirked, before the band ripped through *Gimme Chocolate!!*, much to the confusion of middle America.

"Babymetal's noise is Satanic!! This is TERRIBLE!!" tweeted one particularly

Babymetal: satanic, according to some deeply religious Twitter twits

PRESS

angry viewer – an opinion echoed by many irate, amoeba-brained religious fanatics, seemingly just as outraged as metal's more elitist quarters by a song about how much three young girls enjoyed chocolate.

It mattered not; for all the toy-throwing from their detractors, the patronage of a certain Rob Halford was of far more interest to most metal fans. So, when Babymetal were invited to play the 2016 Alternative Press Music Awards, roping in the Metal God to plough through Judas Priest classics *Breaking The Law* and *Painkiller* was an unbelievable coup.

"I've always been a big supporter of something which I think is going to get a lot of traction," Rob tells us. "So I was delighted to be asked. It was such a hectic day that it was over in a flash, but it was a blast."

With the rest of the world catching up quick, back in Japan things had moved up yet another notch. The Metal Resistance tour was due to end on September 19, and the band were booked for the massive 55,000-capacity Tokyo Dome. Such was the demand that a second show was added for the following day.

"There's this idea that metal is huge in Japan," Paul Brannigan says, "but that's actually a bit of a myth. Aside from Maiden or Metallica, none of our big bands could play the Tokyo Dome. I've seen Avenged Sevenfold over there, and they can't play arenas in Japan. So, for a band like Babymetal to do two nights there... it is pretty much unheard of."

"They invited me out to see them at the Tokyo Dome," remembers Alan Day. "I think it's the biggest indoor music venue in the world. Over here it would be like the equivalent of going to see U2 at Wembley Stadium. You literally couldn't get any bigger."

It was a landmark for the band – a dream that was almost unthinkable a few years before.

"In Japan we have played many big venues, like Budokan," Su-Metal told *Kerrang!* in the build-up to the shows. "But Tokyo Dome was always a place that I've been dreaming of performing at. Even in Japan, not everyone gets a chance to perform here!"

Another bucket list moment was ticked off on January 11, 2017, at the 17,000-capacity Gocheok Sky Dome in Seoul, South Korea, where Babymetal were main support to the biggest metal band in history. "Metallica are like gods to us," Su-metal said at the time. "I had been admiring them for a long time and dreamed to perform with them, so I never thought it would come true this fast!"

Metal God meets the Fox God: Babymetal and Rob Halford at the Alternative Press Music Awards in 2016

"YUI TOLD ME SHE HAD TO FOLLOW HER OWN PATH"

YUKA OKUBO

So far Babymetal's career had been one success story after the next – the epitome of a meteoric rise. But what goes up eventually has to come down, and 2018 represented something of an annus horribilis for the band.

On December 30, 2017, longtime Kami Band guitarist Mikio Fujioka, a graduate of the Musicians Institute of Osaka, fell while visiting an astronomical observation platform. Tragically, he succumbed to his injuries and passed away on January 5, surrounded by his wife and daughters, at the age of 36. The band tweeted the news alongside lyrics from their song *The One, 'We are the one, together, we're the only one, you are the one, forever.'*

Shaken by the event, the band still headed out on the road in May 2018 and would later launch their own comic book, *Apocrypha: The Legend Of Babymetal*, an origin story of the band. But something else was about to hit: without any explanation, Yuimetal dropped off the band's US tour.

The band's management declared that "Yuimetal remains a member of the band", but she was still absent by the time they hit Europe in June, and in October it was announced that she had left the band due to "health concerns".

"Although I thought it over and over," began Yui's own statement, "I decided to leave Babymetal [...] There was a strong desire to stand onstage again, but there is also a feeling that I am not in perfect condition."

"Yuimetal is like a family member to this group," Su-metal told us when we caught up with the band in 2019. "Although she has left, we'll continue to support her in the future."

Even a longtime fan like Yuka Okubo was a shocked by the news at first. "I know the girls had known each other since elementary school," she says. "So, I really believed that bond was so strong that they would stay together. But I spoke to Yui and she explained to me that she had to go and follow her own path and her dreams; it wasn't a negative thing. She'll always be part of Babymetal."

After nothing but success to date, this didn't feel like it was part of the Fox God's plans...

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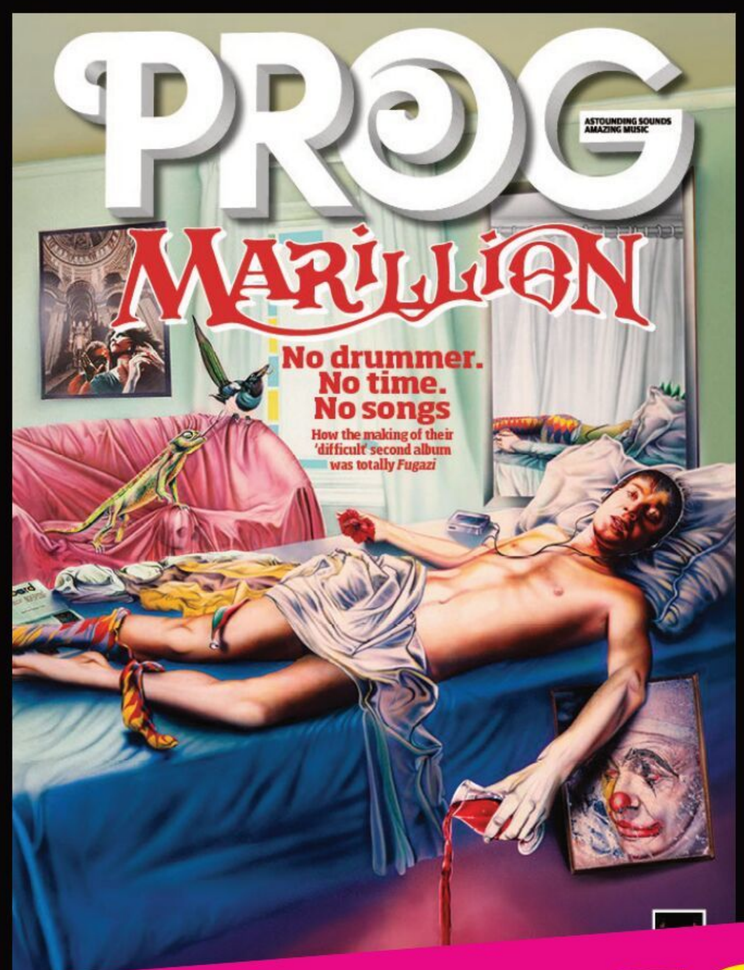

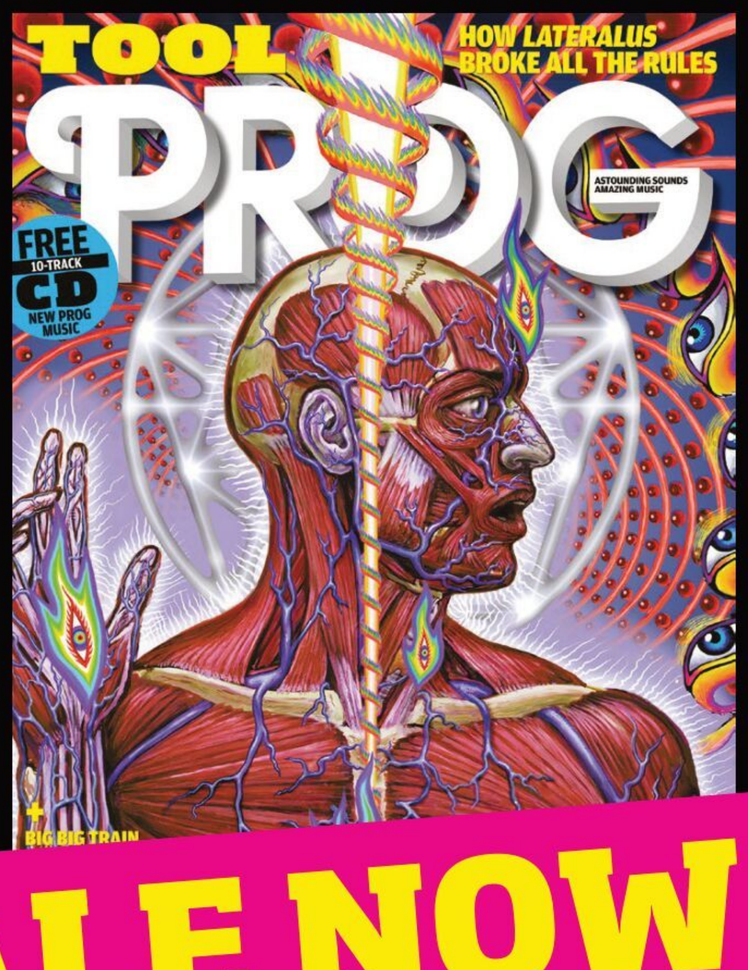

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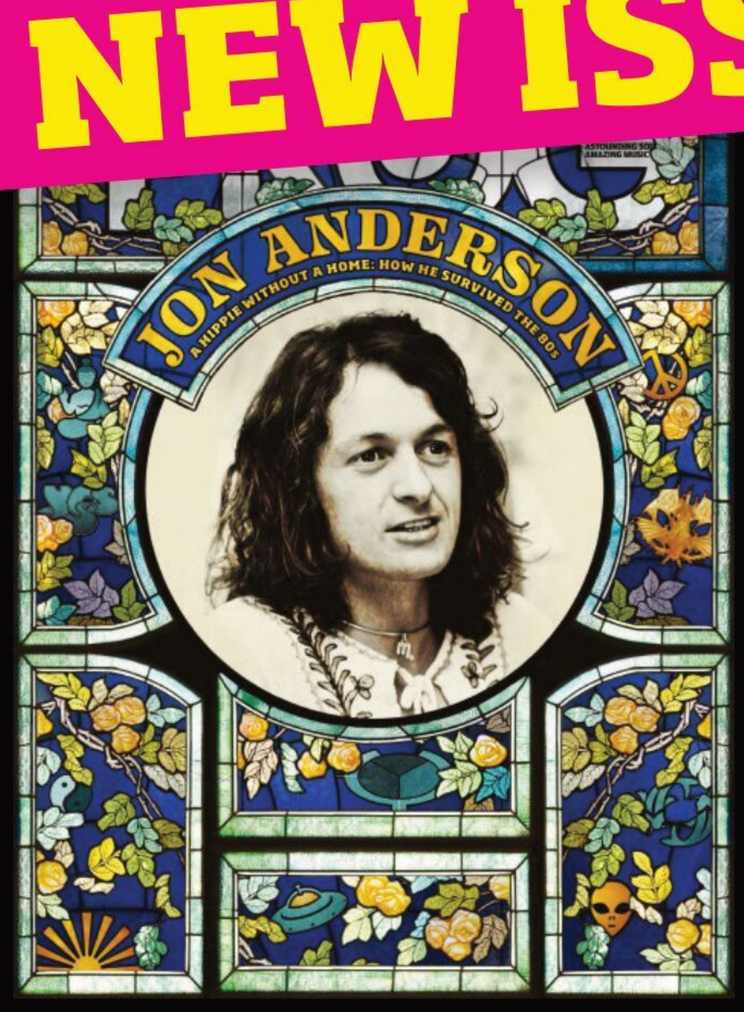

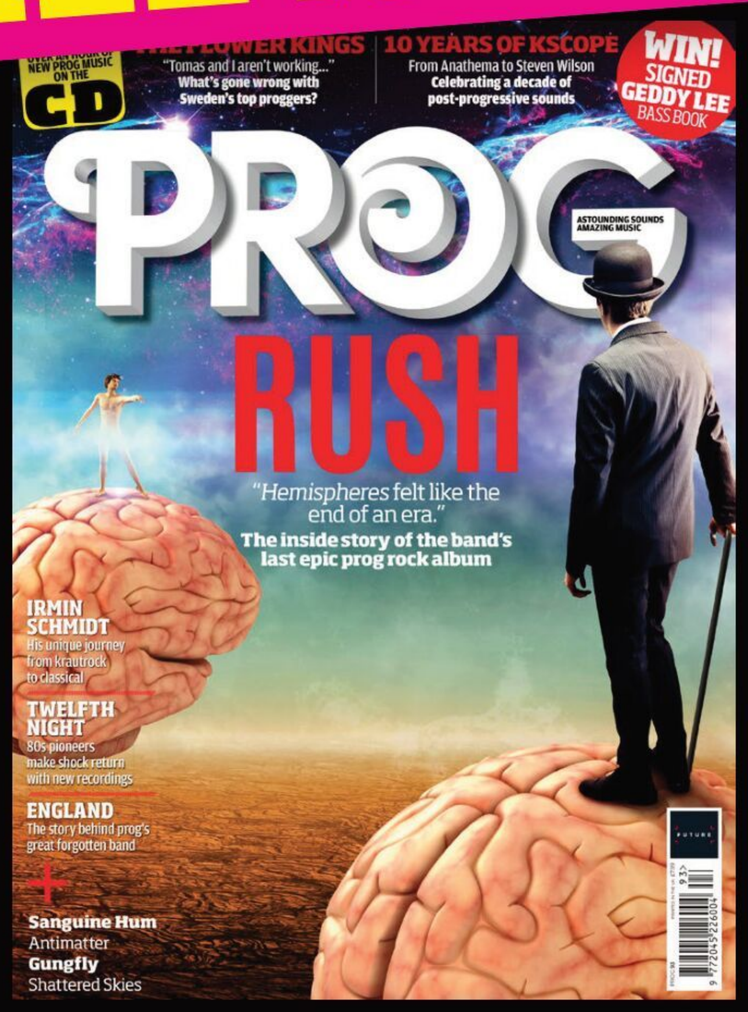

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IV: METAL GALAXY

From Glastonbury to the Galaxy itself, with their third album, it seemed nowhere was immune from Babymetal

WORDS: STEPHEN HILL

When you've conquered the world, what do you do next? You conquer the universe, obviously.

The challenges of 2018 led to the girls' first extended period away from the spotlight. They punctured the silence on April 1, 2019 – Fox Day on the Babymetal calendar – by announcing they would be releasing a third album later that year, and would be embarking on a series of headline shows titled Babymetal Awakens – The Sun Also Rises and Babymetal Arises – Beyond The Moon – Legend M.

On June 28, the day of the first concert at Yokohama Arena, they unleashed bouncy, summery new single *Pa Pa Ya!!* and revealed their record would be called *Metal Galaxy*. That night, a dancer took Yuimetal's place onstage – one of three dubbed the Avengers, who would take turns to sub in.

Kobametal described it to us as "The beginning of a new Babymetal. On top of Su-metal and Moametal, their supporting Avengers are the chosen dancers that the Fox God summoned" before adding the typically on-brand: "Who will be chosen is something only the Fox God knows."

"I think the fans accept the Avengers," a slightly more non-committal Yuka says. "Anyone that comes into the Babymetal family is welcomed. But it's always going to be about the three original girls."

After a second Yokohama Arena show the following day, Babymetal hopped on a plane to the UK and took another huge step into the mainstream, joining a Glastonbury bill featuring gargantuan artists such as Stormzy, The Cure, Liam Gallagher and Kylie Minogue. With a Sunday afternoon set on the Other Stage, they made history by becoming the first Japanese act to play on one of the festival's main stages.

The band were pitted against, of all people, Sir David Attenborough (yes, really) on the Pyramid Stage. And, as much as we love learning about the mating rituals of the white-tailed wildebeest of Africa from kindly ol' uncle Dave, we love circle pits and riffs a fuckload more.

Hammer Editor Merlin Alderslade was there to witness what he called in his review "a curious, decent-sized crowd's bemusement melt into amusement, before giving away to pure joy".

"I know that Glastonbury is one of the world's biggest festivals," Su-Metal told *NME* after their set. "I was really nervous but after a few songs the audience had their hands in the air and were screaming. We're looking forward to Billie Eilish!"

"IF YOU MAKE IT TO 10 YEARS, YOU'RE PART OF THE FURNITURE"

ROB HALFORD

They were steadily cranking up the hype-o-meter, but it ticked over into the red when word got out that *Metal Galaxy* featured a number of high-profile guest spots from the likes of Arch Enemy's Alissa White-Gluz, on the song *Distortion*, and Sabaton frontman Joakim Brodén, on *Oh! Majinai*. Even metalheads who were previously snooty about the band had to admit that sounded pretty fucking cool!

Moametal and Su-Metal: no longer baby-faced Babymetal

SUSUMU MIYAWAKI(PROGRESS-M)

"I was surprised they wanted me to join them," Joakim told us prior to the album's release. "But why the hell not! They are good people and put on a good show."

"Arch Enemy have a strong relationship with Japan," Alissa added. "They asked if I wanted to take part and I said yes. They gave me really detailed information about how they were picturing it."

Babymetal were, once again, the talk of the metal scene. The waiting world finally got to hear *Metal Galaxy* on October 8, and it quickly proved itself to be the grandest, most diverse and challenging record of their career. Not all reviewers outside metal circles got it, although *The Guardian* called it "the kawaii metal *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*" in reference to Kanye West's genre-defining and critically adored 2010 masterpiece. But in an 8/10 review in the pages of this magazine, Dannii Leivers said, "For a band whose existence is one massive curveball, the number of tangents on show here suggest this band are capable of growth we never imagined."

The record hit the top 20 in the UK Top 40 and the US Billboard Top 200, becoming America's highest-charting Japanese language album ever, and the first album by an Asian band to top the US Top Rock Albums Chart. Babymetal were on their debut headline tour of the country, and the release date coincided with their first arena headliner at The Forum in Inglewood, LA, in front of more than 17,000 fans. To prove the newfound pull of global metal, they brought Mongolian folk metallers The Hu out with them for shows in Portland and Seattle.

"Both of our bands have our own original concepts," says The Hu's multi-instrumentalist, Jaya. "We both sing in our native languages, and one could view our bands as heavy metal. But the Japanese and Mongolian sounds we bring to our music bring a whole other dynamic."

As for the shows themselves…

"We did get to hang out a little backstage," he remembers. "We felt a lot of love and support each night – Babymetal's fans were very loud and shouting 'Hu! Hu! Hu!'. We also got to watch parts of their show and they were amazing. Their vocals and choreography, plus the skill level of their musicians, was very impressive."

Babymetal welcomed in 2020 with their first European headline run – but not even the Fox God could have foreseen the pandemic. Like all their peers, they had to find new ways to stay active beyond the traditional touring cycle. Their most high-profile moment was the collab track *Kingslayer*, on Bring Me The Horizon's *Post Human: Survival Horror* EP, bringing together two of our genres' biggest contemporary hitters.

Moametal, Su-Metal and Avenger Riho Sayashi on The Other Stage at Glastonbury Festival, 2019

"I WAS SURPRISED THEY WANTED ME TO JOIN THEM"

JOAKIM BRODÉN

In December, they released a 'best of' compilation album for their 10th anniversary, and celebrated by performing 10 shows at the Budokan between January and April. At the end of the final night, a cryptic message from the Fox God was shown, insinuating that another huge change is coming.

"Despite the ongoing pandemic, BABYMETAL once again gave a powerful performance and successfully ended the series of 10 Budokan shows," a press release from the band's management read. "At the end of the 10th show, it was announced that BABYMETAL departed from earth and were to become a LIVING LEGEND."

Quite what that means is anyone's guess, and there seems little point in making predictions about the phenomenon that is Babymetal. It's been a spectacular 10 years for a group most people thought were just a curio, a gimmick or a one-hit wonder. Far from it – Babymetal are the success story no one saw coming (well, there was that one fox guy, but definitely no one else.)

"Back when they started, there wasn't really this mainstream fascination with Eastern culture and J-pop," says Paul Brannigan, "and it's hard for any metal band to cross over. So, the idea that this was a calculated thing, or that this was an easy way to be successful… it's really not. It's incredibly unlikely to have ever happened, so the fact that it has is nothing short of remarkable."

"Where they are now was where Priest were on *British Steel*," Rob Halford adds. "Just take that in for a second. Ten years in this business, it's very difficult for any band, and if you make it then you're the real deal – you're part of the furniture."

Ten years not out, then. Here's to the next decade.

BABYMETAL'S BEST-OF ALBUM, *10 BABYMETAL YEARS*, IS OUT NOW VIA EARMUSIC. SEE MORE AT BABYMETALSTOREUK.COM AND WWW.BABYMETAL.COM

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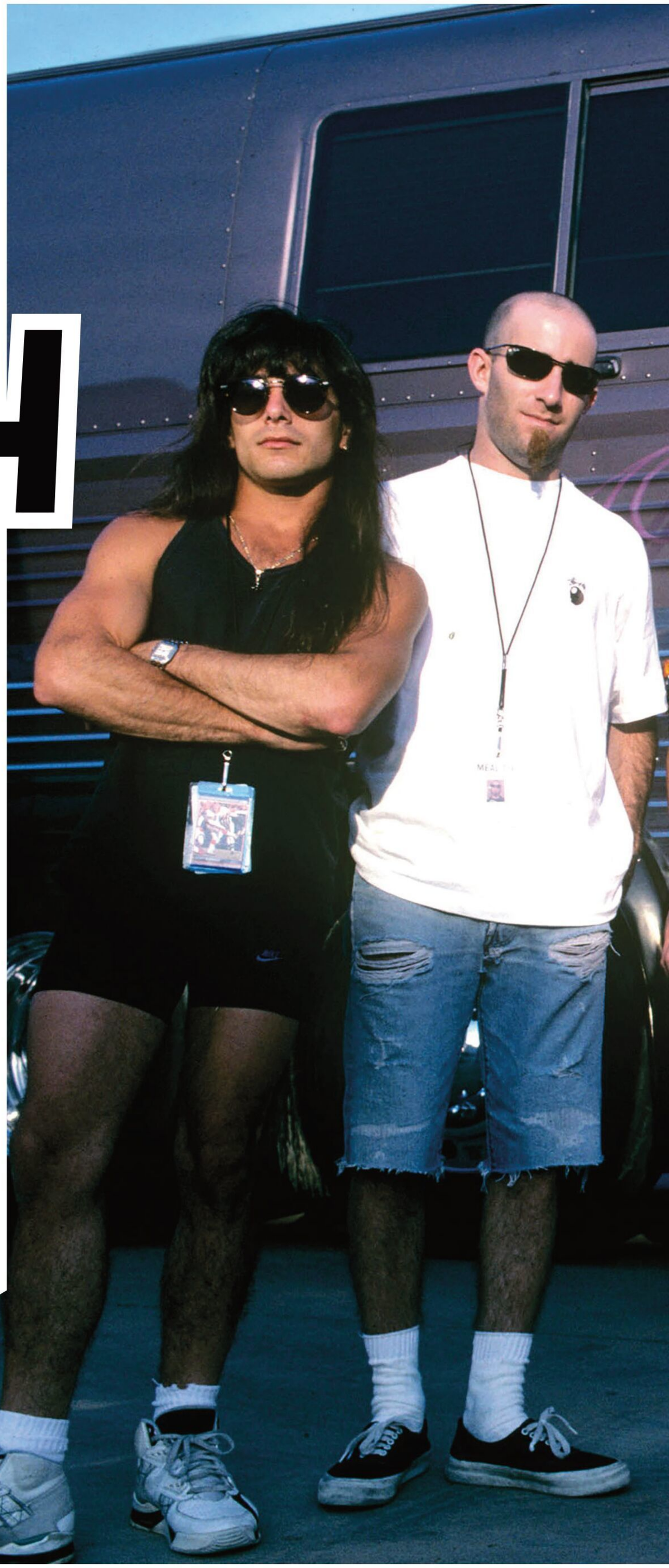
WHEN THRASH CONQUERED THE WORLD

Thirty years ago, thrash's biggest names set their egos aside for Clash Of The Titans: one of metal's most iconic and infamous tours. In May, we went behind the scenes of a legend

WORDS: RICH HOBSON



GENE AMBO/ICONICPIX

CLASH OF THE TITANS

By the end of the 1980s, four bands had emerged as kings of the burgeoning thrash metal scene: Metallica, Slayer, Megadeth and Anthrax. Though not yet the 'Big 4', they'd each released landmark albums and were heralded as indicators of the genre's enormous potential. But Metallica were quickly pulling ahead, as 1989's *...And Justice For All* had broken the Top 10 on the US Billboard 200.

"Metallica were in a league of their own – they didn't need anything from anybody. They chose their own path; I think it was like, 'We've done all that [thrash] stuff', and so they aimed higher!', says Slayer guitarist Kerry King.

Their peers weren't about to miss their own shot at the big time, however. A plan was hatched: to bring Slayer and Megadeth together for a tour that would see them reach the arena-headlining level of Metallica.

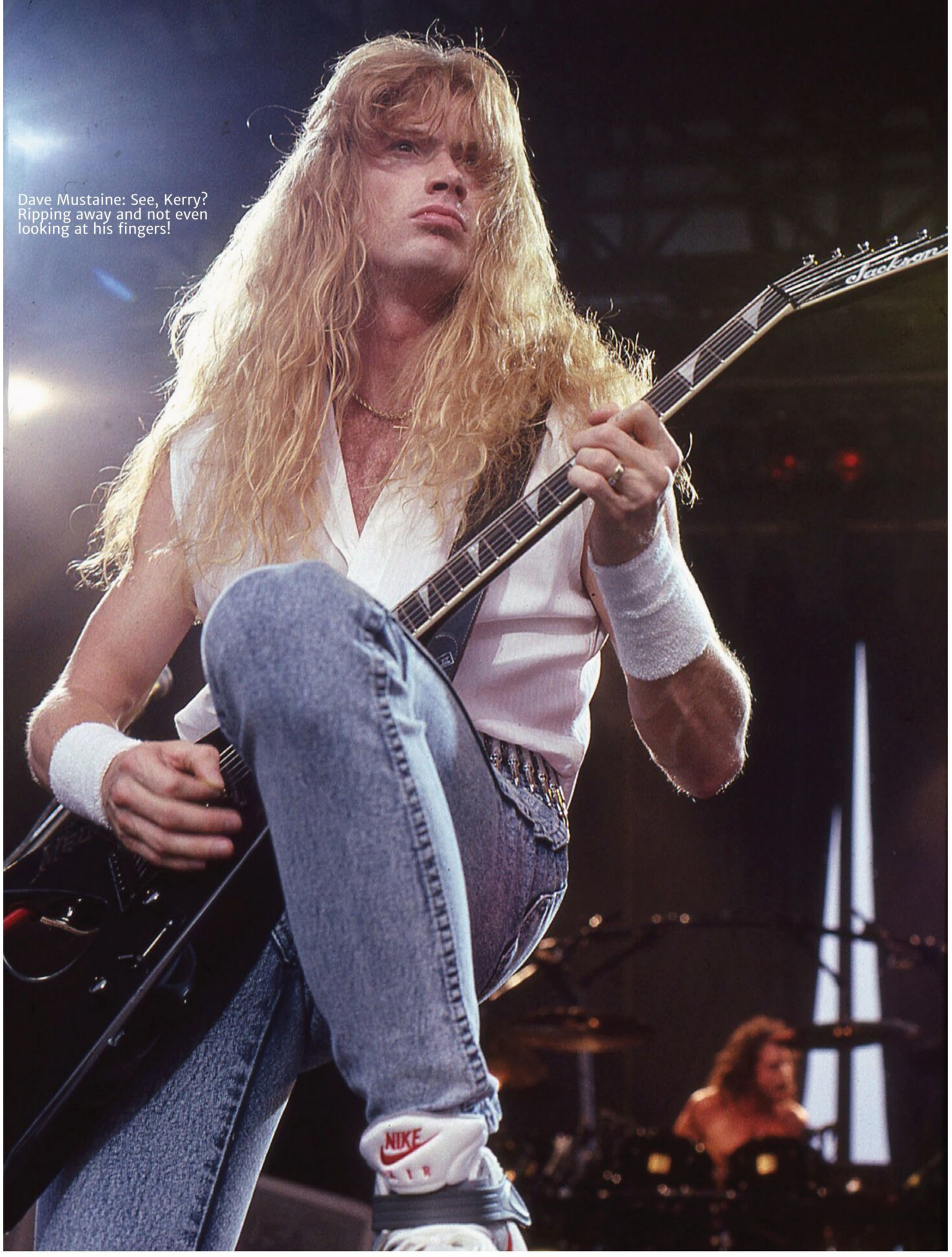
Package tours weren't new. A decade earlier, the Metal For Muthas tour – Motörhead, Samson and Saxon each playing on different dates, supported by a range of young bands – had helped popularise NWOBHM, thrash's direct progenitor. But Clash Of The Titans was something different: a coalition of greats who could achieve more together than alone. This is the story of how Clash Of The Titans revolutionised touring, took thrash into the big leagues and cemented the concept of the Big 4.

★★★★★

It began in Europe. Co-headlined by Slayer and Megadeth, the bill was designed to cross the enormous gap between the venues they had been headlining (2-5,000 capacity) to full arenas (average capacity: 16,000). There were logistical challenges: getting two of thrash's biggest names together came with the mammoth task of ironing out every detail to ensure both bands were equally represented on the bill. The clash had begun...

John Jackson (Founder of K2 Agency): "We already had a tour approved by Slayer's manager, Rick Sales. Megadeth were also looking to tour around the same time, so I thought, 'Wouldn't it be brilliant if we could put them together?' On the face of it, it wasn't necessarily a slam dunk, but that was one of the reasons we had pulled it together – we felt together those bands could do better than either would on their own."

David Ellefson (ex-Megadeth): "The thinking was, if we could combine forces, Megadeth and Slayer – later Anthrax too – we figured we could achieve the same level of success as a band like Metallica. We'd already worked together a few times by that point anyway – Kerry was even in Megadeth at the start."



Dave Mustaine: See, Kerry? Ripping away and not even looking at his fingers!

Kerry King (Slayer): "[Playing with Megadeth] was killer! The only reason I considered it is because I was such a big Mustaine fan – I saw him play with Metallica when they were still a southern California band. It blew me away that he'd be up there ripping on guitar, not even looking at what he was doing. I played the first five shows and it was a good time; I was just honoured that he wanted me to help him out."

John Jackson: "We settled on the name Clash Of The Titans because a) it's a great name, and b) it says exactly what it is!"

David Ellefson: "It'd be a team effort where we'd have to put our egos aside. That was probably the biggest clash of the titans – not with the outside world, but internally! Who closes the show, who gets the right set time... these were discussions that turned into finer negotiations behind the scenes. In Europe, the line-up was fixed: Slayer would close and Megadeth were in third position, which I always maintain is the *best* position as the fans still have loads of energy and the beer's still working!"

Kerry King: "I would *always* rather close. I don't care who plays before us, we're gonna smoke 'em."

★★★★★

Clash Of The Titans kicked off in Belgium on September 22, 1990. It soon became the hottest ticket going, and city after city sold out as the tour rampaged through Switzerland, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, France, Germany, Sweden, Denmark and the UK. The bill was rounded out by the

FRANK WHITE

Guitar gods (left to right): Dave Mustaine, Scott Ian, Jeff Hanneman, Kerry King. (Special mention must go to Jeff's shorts)

addition of Bay Area contemporaries Testament and Suicidal Tendencies – the LA crossover thrashers who represented a new breed of thrash. This was the genre's commercial and critical peak, and each band had just released – or were on the verge of releasing – game-changing records.

David Ellefson: "Slayer were just about to drop *Seasons In The Abyss* and we were working up to *Rust In Peace*. The tour took us into arenas, so it was big news, you know? Testament had got *Souls Of Black* coming around that time too, so it was a really special time for heavy metal."

Kerry King: "That kind of thing *never* happens for a two-band bill let alone four. Bands with big albums just don't tour together and here we were with four bands with huge albums. I mean, Suicidal were coming off of *Lights, Camera...* what a great album!"

Chuck Billy (Testament): "Clash Of The Titans was a big opportunity – it was a chance to play some real shows in places we'd otherwise only visit for festivals. We'd never even played shows indoors at some of these places! Soon we realised that shit, there was a caveat that we needed a new record out to get on the tour. Cool – let's go to the studio and drink some beers and play some songs!"

David Ellefson: "Dave [Mustaine] and I saw Megadeth as an arena band right from the off – you have to remember it was a conception before it was a reality. I remember sitting in the apartment in Sycamore Avenue [in Hollywood] discussing everything, down to our names – how do you have a band with two Daves in it? It was all about the vision of what we could be and the band formed to fill that vision."

"THAT TOUR LAUNCHED US"

CHUCK BILLY

Chuck Billy: "That tour launched us as a headliner in Europe. We'd been working hard on our music for four years and really wanted to prove that we belonged there. The other guys were so cool and down to earth, so we could all just go out and put on a great performance."

★★★★★

The tour wasn't without hitches, however. At the time, we asked Suicidal Tendencies frontman Mike Muir how it was going. "We haven't had any problems with Slayer, they're really cool. The same applies to the crew," he said. And Megadeth? "We don't see them and I'm very pleased about that," he replied. Additionally, the Megadeth Daves were freshly on the wagon after battling addictions.

Chuck Billy: "A couple years before, we'd toured with Megadeth and Dave [Mustaine] was smoking, drinking and everything, which meant the guy we toured with a couple years later was a completely different person, telling us not to smoke in the building! We were young, like, 'That's your problem not ours', but it must've been tough being on their own. We were too immature to realise what was at stake."

Kerry King: "It's difficult sometimes to sift through the years because me ▶

GETTY

and Dave [Mustaine] can be on edge for decades at a time, but then completely cool with each other for decades too. Mustaine and I were on the rocks at that point, but we made it work. It's funny – when we did The Big 4 shows together later he took me aside and said, 'You know, you and me are the only guys who have played in two of the Big 4!' But back around Clash we were all peaking, but we also had a chip on our shoulders about proving ourselves and that made every show special for fans."

David Ellefson: "Because we were clean, we couldn't go hang out where the parties were. Ron Laffitte was a terrific manager for us in that regard. His icon was Pat Riley of the Lakers, so he was all about team and focusing on how you could channel all this talent so we'd be marching in the same direction. He pulled us together, got us sobered up and made sure we'd have band meetings, sobriety meetings… everything to keep going the right way and harness the greatness that was developing in the band at the time."

Chuck Billy: "There was definitely some butting of heads – between Kerry and Dave Mustaine, myself and Dave Mustaine… Dave Mustaine and Dave Mustaine… ha ha! In the end we all worked through it."

★★★★★

Interpersonal conflict or no, 'greatness' was certainly attained. Clash Of The Titans' initial run ended with an enormous show at Wembley Arena on October 14, 1990 – Slayer would use footage from it for their *War Ensemble* video. The bands couldn't rest on their laurels though, and it wasn't long before a sequel took shape. Anthrax were added as a third headliner and the bands agreed to rotate positions on the bill each night. The opening spot was filled by a wild card: Alice In Chains.

Scott Ian (Anthrax): "Our record had just gone Gold in the States and we were sat in a dressing room playing alongside our heroes, Iron Maiden. But here was an offer to come out and do those same venues just a few months later. Our reaction was, 'Why do we need this? We can do it ourselves', so we initially said no. By the time we got offstage that night there was another fax and this one was *loooong*, explaining all the reasons it made sense for us to do it!"

David Ellefson: "God bless Alice In Chains, they were definitely the odd band out on the bill. [While touring Europe in early 1991] we were at the Volkshaus, Zürich to see The Almighty and Marty [Friedman, guitarist] and I saw Alice In Chains' name on the day schedule, like, 'How goofy are these guys?' figuring they were some local band. All four of us [in Megadeth] decided to go up and see them play, and we were *blown away*. We phoned Ron and told him this was the band we had to take out with us for the tour."

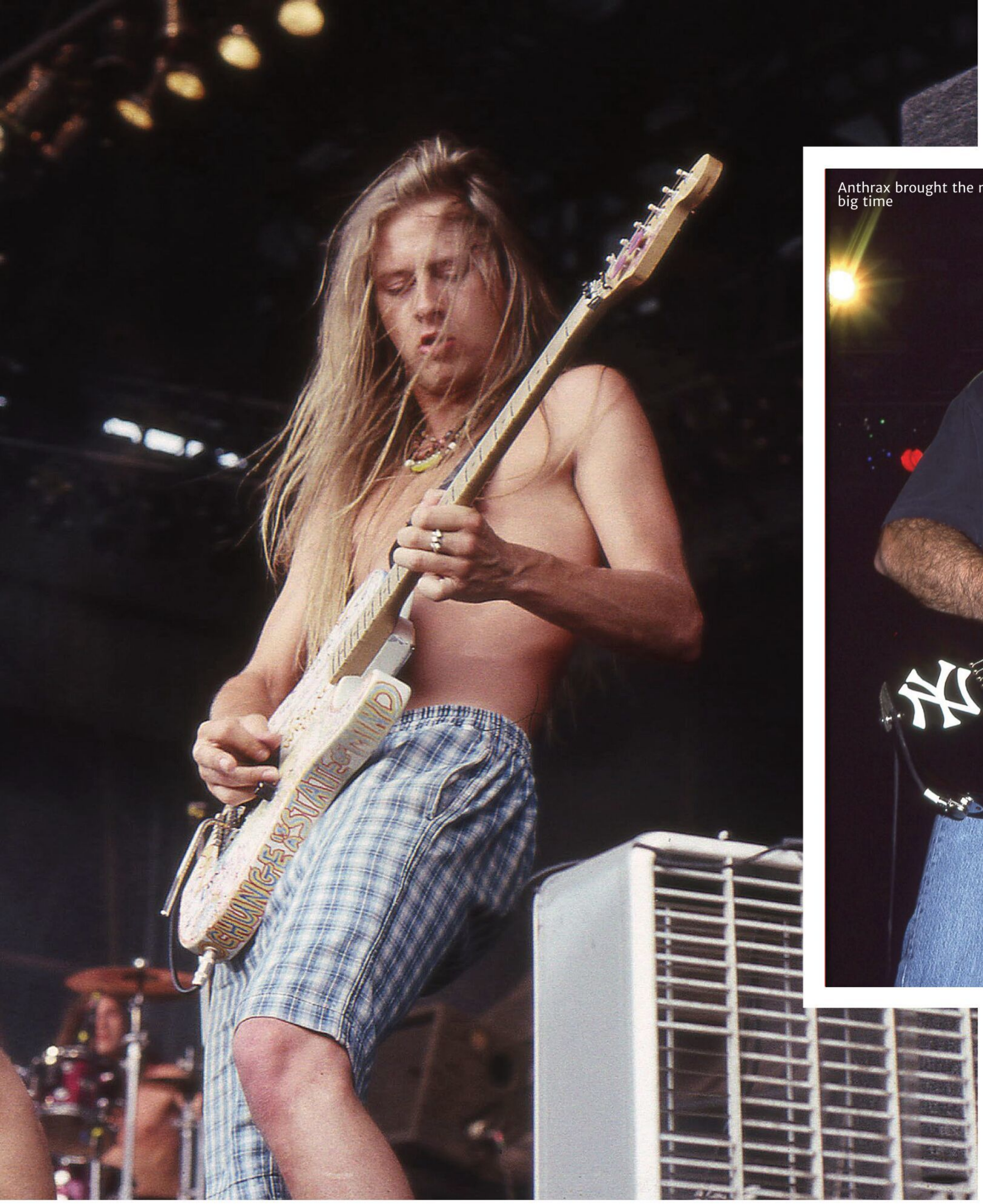
Alice In Chains: a brave addition to the bill

Kerry King: "At first I fucking hated it! They were the *Man In The Box* band and I never needed to hear that song again. It was all I knew because that's all MTV played. But we'd watch them, hang out and watch the [other bands'] sets. Layne [Staley] was probably the best singer of our generation – a superstar with pipes like nobody you'd ever seen before."

David Ellefson: "If there's one thing we know about thrash metal fans it's if you're not thrash, YOU'RE OUT! At the same time, after Clash AIC went out to play with Van Halen and became superstars, so that's their story! I always commend them on their work ethic, for jumping in the trenches and taking their bullets but still going on."

★★★★★

The US leg began in Dallas on May 16, 1991. On June 28, an MTV *Headbanger's Ball* special was set up to celebrate the arrival of metal's newest stars when they played New York's Madison Square Garden. It was a watershed moment for thrash in the US, laced with a sense of anarchy; some of the crowd's 19,000 fans got unruly and began throwing things towards the stage – as a pissed-off Tom Araya would recount to MTV's cameras after the band's set. It even gave hometown heroes Anthrax pause, as they worried about how the crowd would react to a special surprise they had planned for their headline set.



Anthrax brought the noise, big time

"WE WERE TOO IMMATURE TO REALISE WHAT WAS AT STAKE"

CHUCK BILLY

Scott Ian: "We brought out Chuck D and [Flavor] Flav [of Public Enemy] to do *Bring The Noise*. It was so crazy, because we had no idea how the crowd on that tour was going to react. A fuckin' Slayer crowd! There was worry as to whether people were going to dig it or scream, 'Fuck you, don't mix your rap with our metal!' But the moment Chuck and Flavor stepped out onto that stage, there was an energy I'd never felt until that point; it was fucking insane!"

David Ellefson: "It was Anthrax's hometown and I felt very proud for them as it was their day. Playing Madison Square Garden is huge and a lot of those amphitheatres were great. We did this thing with Riki Rachtman of *Headbanger's Ball*. We were MTV darlings, all because we were a thrash band, not a hair metal band. By that point hair metal was moving out, so bands like Metallica and Queensrÿche were holding the top spots. We could see Seattle coming up behind us. It was a world in transition, for sure."

Scott Ian: "Some of these places had never done shows without seats on the floor – Madison Square Garden was a big one for that. Straight away I could see that being a big problem, because promoters and venues didn't know about mosh pits yet. About half the venues didn't want to remove their seating. They had this attitude of, 'We've been doing shows for 40 years, don't tell us how to do our job', only to see 10,000 seats get destroyed in one show. After that tour, all venues would do festival seating for metal shows."

★★★★★

Much of the interpersonal drama that had popped up in the press during the European run had fizzled out, and the bands were having a good time. They were young and conquering arenas, in what David Ellefson refers to as "the summer of heavy metal love".

David Ellefson: "There was actually a little feud starting between Megadeth and Slayer at the time, especially because our lifestyles had become very different. I think that's how the food fight started – a flick of bread suddenly turned into a whole turkey flying across the room. Fuckin' Anthrax always had the best catering. A full Thanksgiving turkey spread, and we're there asking for raisins as a treat! Ha ha ha!"

Scott Ian: "We all had the same rider! As for the food fight… I don't think it's true! I think Tom [Araya] was fucking around, but Charlie [Benante] *did* end up with fish on his shoulder. I remember something like Tom shouting 'SWORDFISH AGAIN' and flinging his plate over his shoulder, and the fish ▶

FRANK WHITE

flew and landed squarely on Charlie's shoulder. Nobody was upset, though – we laughed so hard."

Kerry King: "[My favourite thing was] probably getting the groups together – it's not easy co-ordinating with other bands, especially ones with any kind of fame or career. Being able to do that any time is great – it felt great to all come together and show everybody that thrash is rad."

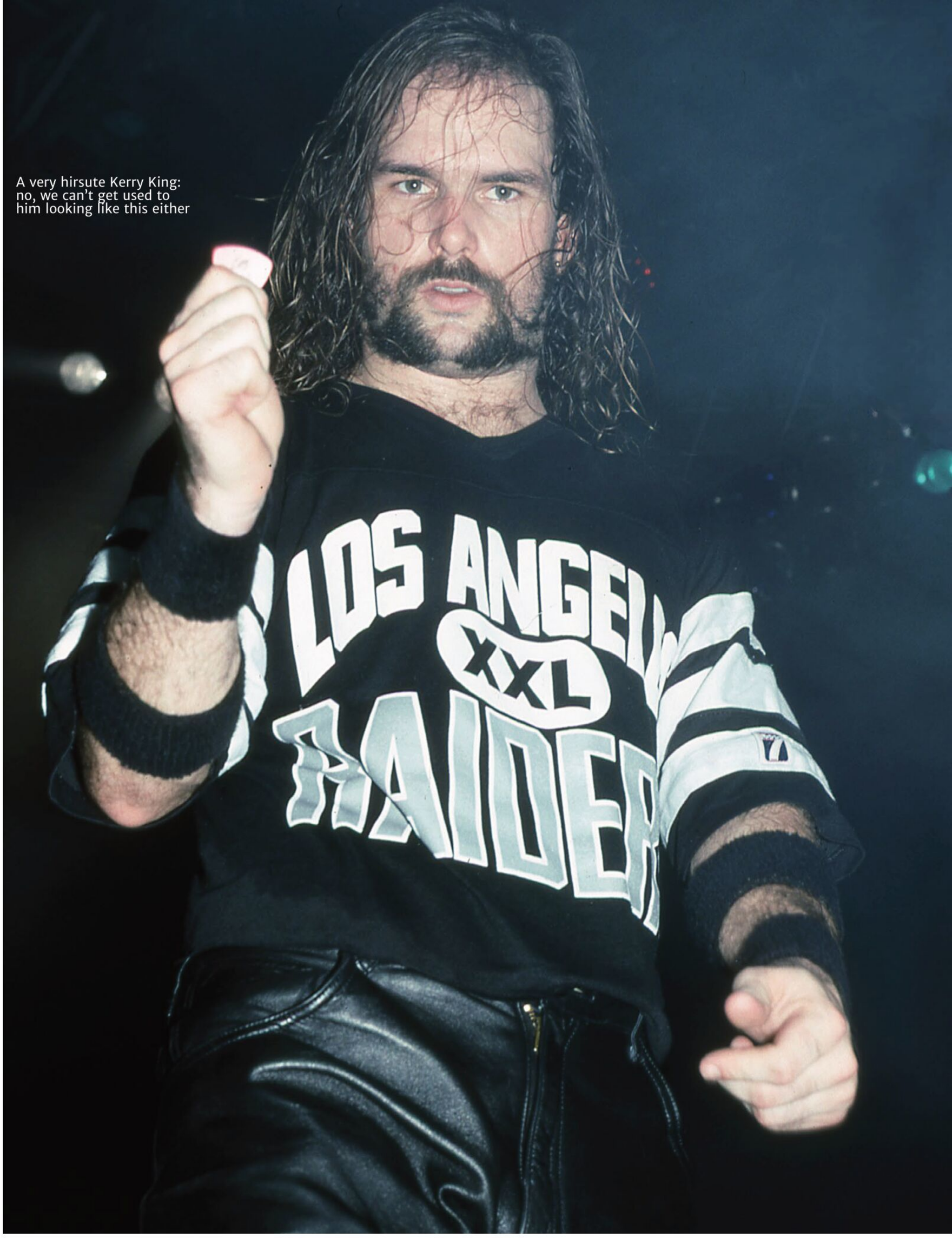
David Ellefson: "It was the summer of heavy metal love. There were people throwing beer, all the rock'n'roll cliches you'd never usually get at a thrash show. I remember having a great conversation with [Slayer guitarist] Jeff Hanneman in a hotel bar. He was there having a few beers and we chatted for ages. That was my real takeaway fond memory of Jeff; despite these hellish songs he could write, he was a kind, sweet guy and I had great admiration for his integrity. There he was, kicking back alone and just making his own entertainment."

Scott Ian: "Jeff and Kerry managed to get paintball guns, so their crew guys got paintball guns too. They thought it was hilarious to shoot at us by bursting out of a room as we were walking down a hallway. We all went out to buy paintball guns, and so it'd turn into a daily war where we'd be blasting each other. At a Hilton in Indiana, somebody's room opened up onto the roof, so we made the adult decision to go out and shoot the giant, giant Hilton sign outside the hotel until it was repainted in 40 different colours! There was a $10,000 cleaning cost! Luckily, we all pitched in to cover it."

★★★★★

The Stateside dates of Clash Of The Titans did more for Slayer, Megadeth and Anthrax than make them into rock stars. It was an apotheosis that led to the idea of the Big 4. When someone asks, 'Why aren't 'x' in the Big 4?' the answer is simple: who else has played a tour so important to the metal landscape – a tour that changed the model for bands and made the mainstream take notice?

John Jackson: "Clash Of The Titans helped set us up for future package tours too, not least the Unholy Alliance runs Slayer did [first with Slipknot/Mastodon/Hatebreed in 2004, then Lamb Of God/Children Of Bodom/Mastodon/Thine Eyes Bleed in 2006 and finally Trivium/Mastodon/Amon Amarth in 2008]."



A very hirsute Kerry King: no, we can't get used to him looking like this either

"I FUCKING HATED ALICE IN CHAINS!"

KERRY KING

Kerry King: "Each of those tours was just us moving forwards – even when moving forwards wasn't going to be a thing for us anymore. But the end of the 80s was thrash's peak, because afterwards grunge came in and kicked the shit out of everything. Music changed and we basically had to wait before we could really become big again around *God Hates Us All*."

Scott Ian: "I don't remember people calling us the Big 4 at that point – I don't think it was used yet. Metallica were a giant band in their own right, so it makes sense that this term to describe us would originate from this giant, sold-out tour of the States."

David Ellefson: "It's kinda rumoured that [music journalist and longtime *Hammer* scribe] Malcolm Dome came up with the idea of the Big 4. I don't know if even he knows for sure, but it definitely started to be talked about after the Clash Of The Titans. It's a pretty special thing that we started it and lived to tell the tale." H

SLAYER'S *REPENTLESS*, ANTHRAX'S *FOR ALL KINGS* AND TESTAMENT'S *TITANS OF CREATION* ARE OUT NOW VIA NUCLEAR BLAST. DAVE ELLEFSON'S *NO COVER* IS OUT NOW VIA COMBAT RECORDS. A NEW MEGADETH ALBUM IS EXPECTED SOON

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FUTURE

SLIPKNOT

A NUMBER ONE ALBUM. A BAND ON THE BRINK.

In the Summer, we chatted to Corey Taylor, Clown and some of Slipknot's peers and friends to give us the definitive story of *Iowa*, twenty years on

WORDS: DANNII LEIVERS

PRESS

The Nine, on the edge

"There's something almost viscous about it. It's like week-old ham jelly," Slipknot vocalist Corey Taylor drawls, a sadistic grin etched across his face. "It permeates. It's like if you spend too much time in a meat-packing plant, you come away smelling of it."

Twenty years after *Iowa* was unleashed on an unsuspecting world, it's a stain you can't wash off. When Slipknot started work on the follow-up to their game-changing, self-titled debut, no one could have expected the gross and corrosive masterpiece that would emerge from the other end. Written by the band during their darkest hour, *Iowa* was stitched together with hate and bile, a declaration of war against themselves, the music industry and the world.

"When bands like Slipknot break, everyone expects they're going to go in and take it to the next level," says Monte Conner, the former Roadrunner Records A&R executive who signed the band in 1998. "Go a little more commercial, make a record that's a little more mainstream. Slipknot did not do that. They went even heavier. They were not concerned about getting bigger, about writing radio songs."

"We set out to shit all over the expectations of everyone who was looking to guess where we were going," adds Corey. Today the singer is speaking to us over Zoom, croaky-voiced and fresh from the road where he's been playing socially distanced US shows in support of his 2020 solo album, *CMFT*. "That put us in that upper echelon of bands putting out extremely heavy music. Nobody was really doing that in our genre, whatever genre that was."

Iowa was the sound of a band steadfastly refusing to play the game, a dense, malignant and crushingly heavy 'fuck you' to an industry they felt was trying to control their vision. Drawing from death metal and bruised and bloodied hardcore, this time around there were no anthemic, radio-ready *Wait And Bleeds*. No grab-your-mate-in-a-head-lock unifications like *Spit It Out*. Instead, *Iowa* started with cries of grief from DJ Sid Wilson, who had just learned of his grandfather's passing, on unnerving opener *(515)*. It ended with Corey Taylor screaming in pain, as he cut himself with glass, naked in the vocal booth on the album's demented, horror-soundtrack eponymous closer.

"It was a backlash for our dream," recalls percussionist Shawn 'Clown' Crahan, speaking down the phone en route to Palm Springs where he's taking a weekend away from recording Slipknot's next album to spend time with his wife and "90-pound baby pit bull", Dale. "We spent 18 months on that first cycle doing all these

"WE WANTED TO SHIT ALL OVER PEOPLE'S EXPECTATIONS"

COREY TAYLOR

suggestions of what people wanted and feeling a little… puppetish. We're Slipknot. We conjure this dream, and the dream was based around playing live with our culture. It had nothing to do with videos or making albums, interviews, agents, managers… it was all performance.

"By the time we got to the second album, people needed to be curbed and understand their place and that their opinion didn't matter as much as they thought it did. Just because we were the first platinum band on Roadrunner doesn't give everyone the ability to start advising. When we were home to take a breath, it was clear that [the second album] was gonna be disturbing and force fed to the world."

Despite rising from the same scene that had birthed one-time peers Limp Bizkit and Linkin Park, Slipknot had always been too dark and chaotic to truly fit the nu metal mould. But *Iowa* transcended it completely, the band making the jump to stand alone, a genre unto themselves.

Yet going into the process, they had found themselves at their lowest

ebb. Relations in the band had splintered and started to fester as they struggled with the almost overnight transition from working dead-end jobs in their hometown of Des Moines, to becoming the most famous metal band on the planet. Combined with burgeoning addictions, separation from family and fast unravelling mental health, the band were a pressure cooker, ripe for combustion.

"When we did *Iowa*, we hated each other," Shawn told *Metal Hammer* last year. "We hated the world. The world hated us."

In November 2000, the band had just wrapped up their first worldwide tour. Right then, what they needed was a break, a moment to catch their breath and process the last 12 months. Instead, work on *Iowa* began immediately, with late members, drummer Joey Jordison and bassist Paul Gray, heading straight to Paul's brother's house to start writing brand new music.

Two months later, when recording sessions began at LA's Sound City on January 17, 2001, with producer Ross Robinson, there was a different atmosphere to the wolf-pack, brotherhood vibe the band had cultivated on album number one. "We were just all at odds with each other," says Corey. "I don't know if it was jealousy or if it was just insecurity; 'Am I pulling my weight? Is this person getting more attention than me?' It was just dark, and it really spit in the face of everything the band tried to accomplish on the first album."

The sessions, which lasted two and a half months, were tumultuous from the start. The band were staying at Oakwood, a cluster of serviced

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PEOPLE = HITS

Corey Taylor spills the stories behind *Iowa*'s songs

(515)
"This is Sid's part from *People = Shit* cut up. He recorded that after his grandfather passed. You can hear it. I mean, it's so guttural and so emotional. It gives me chills thinking about it."

PEOPLE = SHIT
"One of the few songs we wrote on the road on the first album. It was something that we used almost like a mantra. So when we wrote it, it was almost like a built-in anthem."

DISASTERPIECE
"*Disasterpiece* is my favourite one to play live. It's so heavy, it's so dark, and I'm very proud of the fact that the first line was voted [somewhere as] the worst lyric of 2001."

MY PLAGUE
"I had just come up with the vocal melody for the chorus and I had laryngitis. I was gagging to sing it and had no voice. I held up the paper, just mouthing it, and the guys are like, 'What's he doing?'"

EVERYTHING ENDS
"For the longest time it was just known as 'The Misfit Riff'. That chorus was originally very melodic, but Ross thought it would have more impact if I screamed it."

THE HERETIC ANTHEM
"It was originally called *The Heretic Song*. There are CD singles that have that out there in the world. Then Joey was like, 'I think we should call it 'The Heretic Anthem'."

GENTLY
"*Gently* was actually going to be incorporated on the first album. The version of *Gently* that's on *Iowa* is much heavier, danker, a little more evil and Clown wrote the lyrics."

LEFT BEHIND
"*Left Behind* was an older tune that we reconfigured and refashioned. I wrote the lyrics and did my own thing with it and the chorus really came together well."

THE SHAPE
"I was struggling to figure out what to do on the chorus. I had the screaming bit, but it just felt empty. Coming up with that melody line filled in the blanks for me."

I AM HATED
"Ross was the one that wanted me to break it down a little more evil and a little cleaner. Then we would punctuate [it] with the heavy shit, until you got to the big chorus."

SKIN TICKET
"I remember watching Clown play that riff with Mick [Thomson], and then Mick took it and he and Jim [Root] really worked it out. We were trying to do a *Tattered & Torn* thing [from the debut album], but it became so much more heavier."

NEW ABORTION
"I had the name and when they started playing music for me, I knew this going to be *New Abortion*. The chorus was a kind of a unification – all of us embracing the idea that we're all dead before we're even born."

METABOLIC
"For the longest time, we held *Metabolic* back from the audience live. Then we played it for them, and the audience was like, [shrugs] 'OK, cool.' And we're like, 'Fucking assholes!'"

IOWA
"*Iowa* was such a tribal experience. I can remember us in that room, we only played it twice. What you're hearing is live. I recorded the vocals naked, completely fucked up."

apartments a short drive from the insanity of Hollywood. Whereas the band had self-imposed a rule of straight edge sobriety while making the first album, for *Iowa*, that went out the window.

"There was a big change with alcohol, being near Hollywood, the parties, and new management, which was funding anything that they wanted at the time as far as partying and drinking and going to clubs," says Ross Robinson, recalling the struggle to maintain control over the increasingly fractured sessions. "People were partying, people weren't talking, and I was pretty much getting frustrated with, 'It's not the same!'... 'We need to bring this together!'"

"There were days where I would wake up in someone else's house and I had no idea how I got there or how long I'd been there," adds Corey, who was drinking heavily and struggling with his voice as a result. "It was intense. The issues I was going through on *Iowa* were very selfish, very self-loathing, very self-isolating. I wasn't mature enough to deal with a lot of things that the band was going through, and I had issues with my contributions to the band... I felt like I was letting people down."

Left to their own devices, things quickly spiralled out of control. "We had no one looking out for us," continues Corey. "Our [then] management basically just fed us to the wolves. That was one of the reasons we parted ways with them later on, because they didn't have our best interests at heart. As long as they got their percentage, they didn't care. That [resulted in] us thrown on tour after tour, regardless of addictions, regardless of any injuries, regardless of all of these things going on."

When Monte Conner visited the band early on during the recording sessions, he admits the relationship felt "strained", but insists the label weren't pressuring the band to deliver the next *Wait And Bleed*. "I mean yes, we would have liked [a single] and we did tell them when they turned in the record, 'Wow, this is heavy,'" he says. "We knew we had challenges ahead of us, but we never pressured the band to make a commercial record. We were ready, willing and able to take the album on its own terms and deal with whatever they gave us."

For Ross Robinson, the sessions had become a battle of mental wits versus agony. Around three weeks into the sessions, he had broken his back in a brutal motocross accident that had left him screaming in pain, a sound that can be heard in the drum tracks on the album. "I did this, I think it was a 75- or 85-foot jump, and the back wheel just came over the back of my head and I went headfirst into the ground," he says. "It felt like my body bent in half, hyper-extending the wrong way."

Slipknot were spiralling out of control, but it resulted in one amazing album

Nevertheless, Ross doped up on painkillers and reported for work a day later. "I showed up in extreme pain, on time, in time, and said, 'Let's get it the fuck on,'" he says. "And they turned into Slipknot 1 again as far as showing up. Because if I was doing it, they had *nooo* excuse. I remember that record every day. It lives in my body as annoying pain."

When the recording sessions ended in early April, Ross "curled up in a ball and cried". "Paul and Joey came over to my house, and we just finished recording, we were done the next day," he says, the emotion of the memory palpable. "A picture was taken, god, I wish I had that picture, and the three of us are just... just holding each other and basically sobbing. Our tears were flying out of our bodies, and we held each other for like 10 minutes. Such a crazy, crazy, pivotal moment."

Due to delays with the mixing, *Iowa*'s release date was delayed, but the band's European jaunt, aptly titled Kill The Industry, kicked off in May 2001 regardless. It would be another three months until *Iowa* hit the shelves and, by the time it did, the band were already burned out.

"The recording process was such a gnarly experience for us, we really wanted a month to get our heads together and we didn't get that," says Corey. "They threw us right into the mouth of the monster. Had we had that time to figure it out, we could physically have been a little better, but by the time we got ready, we were all so ensconced in our own dependencies and issues that there was no way we were going to be able to get our heads right. A lot of the fun stuff that we used to do together [on the road], we stopped doing. None of us hung out, unless we were drinking, and then there was always a danger that we were going to get into a fight..."

As the band stormed across Europe, tempers flared regularly. "I can remember getting into a fight with Sid and to this day it bums me out," sighs Corey. "Just lashing out at him because of my own insecurities and because I was drunk. I think that really put a crack in our relationship for a long time."

"It was the temperature," adds Shawn darkly, recalling the many times he came to blows with his bandmates. "I'm usually the bad guy. They all come for the Clown, so I have to protect myself. It was

PRESS

FRANK FORCINO/FRANK WHITE PHOTO AGENCY

just violent. Walking down the hall, waiting for the show. Violent. Everything about it."

For the *Iowa* cycle, the band's masks and coveralls were given a grotesque makeover. "The masks reflect us pretty well on that cycle," says Shawn. "They were nasty business because we were nasty business. The coveralls were, I don't know, they were like 25-40 pounds, overdone, hot as hell, no chance of survival. We wanted to be more uncomfortable."

Offstage, just as much as onstage, mayhem ensued. All those crazy, gross stories, of faeces, injuries and dead birds that you've heard over the years, and which have fed the Slipknot legend – most of them came from the *Iowa* tour. "I remember girls used to bring hearts, cow hearts, and they'd take a bite out of it and slap me in the face," says Shawn, describing the culture surrounding the band and their fans at the time as a kind of "psychosis". "We took how it was and as we were taking it, we also encouraged it."

When the band hit Birmingham on the *Iowa* tour's 2002 leg, as they ripped into the serrated opening riff of *Surfacing*, the air was suddenly filled with flying red seat covers as the fans started tearing the venue apart. "We thought they were frisbees!" laughs Corey. "I remember looking at Clown, like, 'Are you seeing this shit? What is happening?' It was the biggest pit I'd ever seen, up until that point. It looked like a whirlpool in the ocean, and we were all getting sucked into it. It was the one show where I remember Sid being like, 'I don't know if I want to go out there in the audience tonight.' That's some serious shit."

"OUR TEARS WERE FLYING OUT OF OUR BODIES"

ROSS ROBINSON

The band's *Disasterpieces* DVD, filmed four days prior at the now-defunct London Arena, captured the chaos of the live show. As the band made their way to the stage, Joey vomited on the floor, only for Shawn to smear it promptly on his coveralls. A few moments later, Sid pissed on the drum kit. Injuries were frequent and barely patched up before the band tore out onstage again, sometimes still bleeding or with suspected broken bones.

At another gig, Shawn remembers a fan giving birth in the bathroom, while during a signing in Portugal, a fan presented him with a human thigh bone, etched with the words 'People = Shit', that he suspected had come from a grave. "I didn't know what to do with it, so we gave it a funeral," he says. "Morally and spiritually, I felt horrible, and I had to do something for that human being."

Meanwhile, Shawn, who had struggled with separation from his

wife and three young children during the band's first tour, was dealing with difficult emotional issues back at home. His wife, Chantel, had recently been diagnosed with Crohn's disease and as the tour continued, he found himself alone in hotel rooms, spiralling deeper into depression.

"It was a very dark time in our family's life," he says heavily. The pain my wife went through during that time. And the kids, what they had to go through: one parent ill, one parent on the road. Very tough life situations."

Shawn says that the death of his daughter, Gabrielle, in 2019, has given him a new, difficult perspective on the *Iowa* days. "Life's fucking short," he says brutally. "You can do the math and look at my history to know what I'm talking about. I care about none of this as much as I care about family. And that's hard to say because it should have been that way always. You get confused and I don't have any excuses other than I feel like I've failed and I can't get any of it back. That's a tough pill to swallow for art."

Iowa was finally released on August 28, 2001, going straight into the UK charts at No.1 – still the heaviest, and undoubtedly the grimmest, album to do so. Back in Des Moines, the band regrouped and prepared to head out on the road again, this time on the Pledge Of Allegiance tour, which they were set to co-headline with System Of A Down, alongside Rammstein, American Head Charge and Mudvayne.

Then, on September 11, three days before the tour was set to kick off, Corey was packing his bags when the first plane hit the Twin Towers in New York City. Shawn watched the second plane hit live on the news. Immediately, the shows were pushed back to late September, but the long-term impact on the band would be more severe.

Following 9/11, MTV, which had promised a huge promotional push for *Iowa*'s first single, *Left Behind*, and still had the kind of clout that could make or break bands, decided heavy music was inappropriate for the current climate. Along with many other metal bands, Slipknot found themselves unceremoniously yanked from the airwaves.

"All they heard was heavy metal and they shut us down," says Corey bitterly. "We didn't find out about this until probably a year later, that there was a massive blacklist of bands. What they didn't realise, that we saw at the concerts, was that people needed the release. So not only were we hurting as Americans because of what had happened to us, [we] also had one of our legs cut off professionally."

Clown's family had a lot to deal with while he was out on the road, and it weighed heavily on him

STEPHANIE CABRAL

"GIRLS BIT COW HEARTS AND SLAPPED ME IN THE FACE"

SHAWN CRAHAN

Speaking to Shawn and Corey today, it's clear that *Iowa* and the geopolitics of the time are intrinsically entwined, reflective of each other and a claustrophobic moment when it felt like the world was crashing down. "The philosophy, the metaphor of 'People = Shit', it all just hit home that the world was having a hard time," Shawn says. "You could feel it in the air, it was everywhere. Then it was done. *Iowa*. A little pill. A capsule of boiling life that just toppled over and collapsed and everyone had to regroup."

The legacy of *Iowa* is a towering one, and the biggest risk Slipknot have taken in their 26-year career. Five years ago, when *Metal Hammer* crowned *Iowa* the greatest metal album of the 21st century, we noted that without the album's immense influence on countless bands, today's metal landscape would look very different. The darkness that surrounded its creation would scar the band for a long time, seeping into the recording sessions for their third album, 2004's *Vol. 3: (The Subliminal Verses)*. Yet without *Iowa*, it's highly

Mick Thomson soundtracking the chaos in the pit

unlikely there would have been another Slipknot album at all, much less one as brave and experimental as their sixth and most recent, 2019's *We Are Not Your Kind*.

"I didn't want to be one of those bands that blew up and then just fucking fades away," agrees Corey. "For a long time, I really thought that there was a cap on what we can do, and as we got older, we realised the only cap that's there is what we put on it. You go back and look at all the artists that we've loved our whole lives, not just the heavier stuff, people like Bowie, even Marc Bolan for fuck's sake. Those are the artists that took risks. And Slipknot are now doing that for a heavier generation."

Iowa has undoubtedly been instrumental in ensuring Slipknot's longevity, establishing them as a band that are impossible to predict and who are more than prepared to challenge their listeners. Furthermore, it was the sound of a band doing things their own way, with zero regard for the consequences. Something that's never changed.

"We had nothing to prove to anyone," asserts Shawn. "We gave everything we possibly could, to the videos, to the interviews, to the way we spoke, even the way we did shots of Jack Daniel's. I can't believe we're all still friends."

"We could've been in and out really quick if we had gone the same, safe, sophomore way," says Corey. "We would have shot ourselves in the dick and we would be done. But because we didn't do that, we established our own destiny instead of letting other people rewrite our history."

***WE ARE NOT YOUR KIND* IS OUT NOW VIA ROADRUNNER. FOR UPDATES ON SLIPKNOT STAY TUNED TO SLIPKNOT1.COM**

"THE GOAT'S NAME IS EEYORE"

Clown reveals how *Iowa*'s iconic sleeve came together

STEPHANIE CABRAL

WHO'S THE GOAT ON THE COVER?
"That goat's name is Eeyore. My mentor who got me going into photography, Stefan Seskis, he shot the first album cover, I came up with the concept and I so badly wanted to shoot the second album cover, and I just couldn't get it done. One day I handed him the goat."

DID HE GET THE SHOT?
"I came to the studio later that day and he had taken five or six photos. They were Polaroids. I remember being so frustrated, I couldn't believe he'd got the damn picture taken. I said, 'I've taken hundreds of pictures of this bastard and I couldn't get it done.'"

WHAT DOES THE *IOWA* ARTWORK MEAN?
"The cover has a lot of symbolic, metaphoric solutions in it for everyone in our culture. I haven't really explained it. It's for the end times to put the whole picture together, so I'm not going to go into that. The cover is as important as the inside cover, which is the mirror I made. All these people think they know what Slipknot is, everyone wants to judge a book by its cover. But if you're a good parent, and you're checking out what your child is listening to, you open it up and you realise you're already part of it. There you are. Your twisted little fucking self. Right there in that mirror, you're already part of this timeframe called *Iowa*."

DOWNLOAD PILOT

BACK TO LIVE

A surprise announcement. A three-week turnaround. A weekend where social distancing was dropped for moshing. After two long years, Download opened its gates for a special Pilot event in June. And it ruled.

WORDS MERLIN ALDERSLADE, ELEANOR GOODMAN, STEPHEN HILL, RICH HOBSON, ELIZABETH SCARLETT

PICTURES KEVIN NIXON

Death Blooms welcome us home

None of us dared to dream that Download would happen this year. 2020's edition was cancelled during the first lockdown, and then, in March of this year, organisers announced they had no choice but to call off the much-anticipated 2021 weekend, too. That, coupled with most other live events falling by the wayside, made it a grim time for the music industry and its fans.

Then, on May 26, there was a shock announcement: Download would be going ahead, at a tenth of its capacity, as a government-backed pilot for its Events Research Programme. There'd been a pilot one-dayer headlined by indie band Blossoms in Liverpool's Sefton Park earlier that month, but this would be a full-scale, three-day festival, with camping, designed to test whether large-scale gatherings were viable in the age of COVID. It promised: 'You'll be able to mosh, dance, hug your fellow Downloaders, and rock out without a mask or social distancing!'

"We didn't get the green light until the middle of May," remembers Live Nation Promoter / Download Booker Kam Haq. "Speaking to the agents and managers at the time, they thought we were having a laugh. We had to explain the situation! Everybody was jumping at the chance to play the festival."

The bookers had put together a wish-list of British bands, with Enter Shikari and Frank Carter the first to confirm, followed by more than 40 established favourites and rising stars. Tickets went on sale on June 1, with Festival Republic starting the build a week later, assembling a "small village" on site with all the infrastructure needed for fans. "They pulled it off in record time," marvels Kam. "It was incredible."

When the gates opened at 2pm on Friday June 18, 10,000 festival-goers were welcomed onto Donington's hallowed turf for the event of the year. After doing an at-home PCR test and showing evidence of a negative lateral flow test, they were allowed to behave as you would in the 'before-times', mask-free and without inhibitions.

"The fans were losing their minds," says Kam. "They did the COVID checks, and then the minute they got to take off their masks, when they got on site, they were screaming 'Freedom!' and running towards the campsites. It was like some *Braveheart* moment."

Team *Hammer* were there to capture all the action. This is our blow-by-blow account of the most unique Download of a lifetime, and one that may well set the precedent for live music events to come. We screamed, we cried, we circle-pitted, we saw homegrown talent step up to new heights, and we thanked the metal gods for making this annual pilgrimage possible.

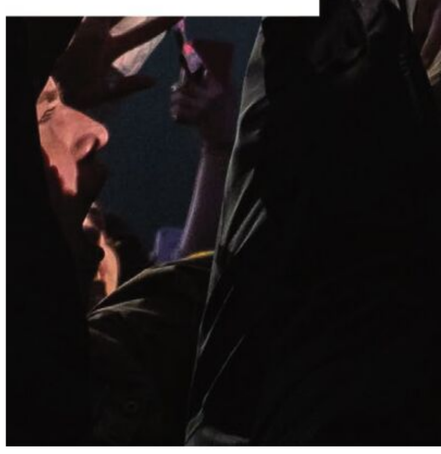
FRIDAY

8am It was inevitable, wasn't it? Weeks of glorious weather give way to the heavens opening. But we don't care – we'll mosh in the rain!

2.47pm Donington might be where rock gods are made, but nobody said anything about having to drive through Poseidon's backside to get there. The motorways are pretty backed up, and the spray is so thick we miss the turning to Download. Twice. Oops.

4.30pm We are on site! The mood is a mixture of nervous excitement and joy, with people not knowing quite what to expect. It's crazy to be standing in a field with thousands of strangers, no masks in sight, and people openly embracing everywhere you look. Forget football – *metal* has come home.
4:50pm Reunions between long-missed friends are happening around us, but there's one union in particular that feels oh-so-satisfying – the first bite of a festival burger. Patty, delicious filling and mega-salty chips. Oh yes.
4.57pm We get our first singalong of the weekend… as Vengaboys' *We Like To Party!* plays over the Second Stage's PA. We do love a bit of pop tat.

5pm **DEATH BLOOMS** take the stage to an almighty roar. "Welcome home! Are you fucking ready?!" screams frontman Paul Barrow. We get a bit teary. Christ, we've missed this.
5.01pm The first pits open up. Death Blooms played Birmingham last night to a seated audience, but this is a *real* show and a huge, historical moment. Not only is it our first proper gig in more than a year, but the future of live music could rest on this weekend.
5.25pm Going hard with a mixture of nu metal aphorisms in a metalcore framework, the band have all the elements that birthed so many club metal bangers in the early 2000s.
5.30pm We bump into Ian Shaw, the promoter who put on Death Blooms and Wargasm last night. "It was probably as emotional as this," he tells us. "It was the first gig I've put on in 15 months and people kept telling me how happy they were. For Death Blooms to be the first band anyone's seen in any real capacity for that same amount of time – it's the best start anyone could've hoped for!"
5.35pm Bar time. Ours is a rhubarb and strawberry cider, thanks!



"IT WAS A BRAVEHEART MOMENT"

KAM HAQ, LIVE NATION PROMOTER / DOWNLOAD BOOKER

6pm Hardcore beasties **MALEVOLENCE** have barely been on 30 seconds before the first pit breaks out, and the air of menace is palpable.
6.11pm For all their thuggish heaviness, Malevolence aren't afraid of showing

Sleep Token cast a spell

"THERE'S NO GOOD PLACE TO TAKE A FUCKING NAP!"

FRANK CARTER, FRANK CARTER & THE RATTLESNAKES

Frank Carter checks on his devotees

their sensitive side. "Every single one of us has lost someone," says vocalist Alex Taylor. "To addiction, to illness – not just to the pandemic. This one goes out to the lads – it's OK not to be OK."

6.26pm There is a sense of emotional triumph as Malevolence gear up for final song *Keep Your Distance*. "Let's hear it for everybody working behind the scenes to put this on!" Alex roars, to an even bigger howl from the crowd.

6.40pm FINALLY! We spot the first costumes of the weekend. God bless the giant bananamen…

7.29pm There's a strong showing for Welsh emo-rockers **HOLDING ABSENCE** and the fans are singing fervently along to every word. *This* is what Download is all about.

7.32pm A toilet roll flies over the heads of the crowd. Last year we'd have been fighting each other for it. It's been a funny old two years…

7.45pm Holding Absence have been waiting "about 18 months" for this. Back in front of a crowd, playing songs from April's *The Greatest Mistake Of My Life* album and having the lyrics sung back at them… Yeah, this is great.

8.52pm There's a moment where it feels like **SLEEP TOKEN** might fail to register. The spectre of Batushka's candle-lighting tonal disaster in 2019 looms large, as the band's intro tape feels too quiet and people carry on talking loudly as they come onstage. Maybe atmospheric-dependent theatrics just don't work at festivals…

8.54pm WHOOSH. Forget what we said. The riffs come in and everyone shuts up instantly, eyes glued to the stage. Soulful R&B vocals serve as a mesmeric anchor point from which the music spirals out in crashing, hypnotic waves.

9pm Sleep Token look incredible. Even without the usual crowd-baiting tricks, robed vocalist Vessel cuts a distinctive figure, hands clutching at the air as his voice soars, bends and swoops. There's no denying this is a band with *character*.

9.56pm Sleep Token have only just finished but Friday headliner Frank Carter is *already* crowdsurfing.

10pm It's time for a good ol' fashioned festival team-up. A beardy Joe Talbot of **IDLES** comes out to gnash his way through the new single, *My Town*.

10.04pm **FRANK CARTER & THE RATTLESNAKES** don't sound as visceral as they once did, but this sleeker new sound has an undeniably transfixing aura. Plus, Frank more than makes up for it by being a true-blue punk maniac, dashing across the stage and lunging down into the crowd for pics, handshakes and singalongs.

10.11pm Frank introduces "future Rock And Roll Hall Of Famer" **CASSYETTE** to the stage for a new song, *Off With His Head. My Town* had an electro-tinged vibe, but this is pure rock'n'roll.

10.18pm If anyone asks why Frank Carter deserves to headline Download, we'll just point to *Lullaby*'s *massive* riff.

10.19pm Frank pauses the song to check on the crowd. Joyous as it is being back at shows, consideration for our fellow fans goes a long way. "There's no good place to take a fucking nap at a show, you know!" Frank tells one mud-caked fan. Back at it!

10.48pm From one rock'n'roll icon to another, Frank Carter & The Rattlesnakes are covering Motörhead's *Ace Of Spades*! This is not a drill!

10.52pm We're coming up on the big finish now, with *Juggernaut* and *Crowbar* to close. It's an explosive one-two, and absolutely *perfect* to cap off our first day back watching live bands again.

11.01pm It's time to *PARTYYYYY!*

SATURDAY

10.30am Ouch. Anyway, Team *Hammer* bump into Ryan Cornall, drummer of electro-punks Wargasm, sporting a broken leg. He's still going to play, mind. The trooper.

10.51am The only thing more ominous than the clouds overhead are the beastly tones coming from the main stage as Conjurer soundcheck.

11.10am We enjoy a comforting cup of tea before the bands begin. Ah, lovely. Anything good on today, then?

Enter Shikari's Rou Reynolds having the time of his life

Bleed From Within: smashing it

12pm Yes! There is! A healthy crowd have gathered to watch **CONJURER** open the Main Stage. The Rugby quartet are pretty much the heaviest band on the bill, and they've got the balls to open their show with a new song. Predictably enough, it's utterly, brutally crushing.

12.12pm A guy standing next to Team *Hammer* is desperately trying to get into Conjurer but, bless him, he's struggling. As guitarists Dan Nightingale and Brady Deeprose slouch to the back of the stage and smash their instruments against their amps, our friend gamely tries to headbang along to formless white noise, before giving up. "This is just noise, isn't it?" he turns to ask his buddy. It is, mate. Lovely, bloody noise.

12.16pm The band launch into the double-time propulsive groove of *Retch* and things step up a level. There's a surge towards the stage and our friend next to us is even headbanging in time!

12.25pm It's been early, it's been brutal, and it's probably not suited to the environment of festival positivity, but Conjurer get a hell of a reception as they leave the stage. Bassist Conor Marshall takes up residence alongside the punters in the mud, screaming feedback filling the air as he stands at the barrier and holds his bass skyward, while his bandmates throw their gear down and leave. They might've sounded like Neurosis and Raging Speedhorn playing Russian roulette, but Conjurer look like actual rock stars. Awesome.

1.02pm The award for Download Pilot's Most Excitable Man has a frontrunner, as **BLEED FROM WITHIN** drummer Ali Richardson bounds onto the stage a good 30 seconds before the rest of his band. As he holds his sticks aloft and looks out over the field, he screams a scream that seems to exorcise a year and a half of pent-up aggression. Something tells us that this is going to be *really good.*

> **"THERE IS NOWHERE ELSE I'D RATHER BE"**
> MAN IN A T-REX COSTUME

1.03pm Holy fuck, Bleed From Within sound massive! From the moment opening track *Night Crossing* slugs us in the gut, we're away. The Scottish groove metal machine are tight and powerful, and frontman Scott Kennedy is a superb focal point, strutting and barking with genuine conviction. It's only the first song, but it's going to take a lot for the rest of Saturday to live up to this lot.

1.10pm *PYROOOOOOOOO!* We love the smell of gasoline in the… er, afternoon. Huge Parkway Drive-style fire jets go off as BFW chug away. So fucking cool. So fucking metal. How did we make it 18 months without this kinda stuff in our lives?!

1.14pm *Afterlife* sounds like the kind of song that should be getting played on main stages the world over. Despite having to plug away for years and being scandalously overlooked by so many metal fans, Bleed From Within are naturals in this kind of environment. Quite how they haven't managed to scale the same heights as some of their peers is a real mystery, but they're here now and proving how great they are. Surely there's no holding them back now?

1.23pm "Where are all my fellow Scotsmen?!" asks Scott, and a cheer goes up. The cheeky lad is obviously happy with the football result from last night, and decides to don a Scotland shirt for final song *The End Of All We Know*. Grinning from ear to ear, Scott kisses the badge on his shirt, and whatever part of this island people are from, they give Bleed From Within a heroes' reception. They've smashed it.

1.30pm We catch up with a gent waving the Scottish flag. His name is Craig and he's travelled from Glasgow. "It is actually very surreal to be here," he laughs. "Bleed From Within were amazing – they really did us proud." Patriotism done right there, lads.

1.46pm We bump into Adam Perry, drummer of A, who's sporting the brightest, pinkest shirt we've ever seen. Looking forward to today, Adam? "Yeah, I am… But I'm still pissed off about the football!" he tells us. "Why did he take Foden off?!" You might wanna give Scott from Bleed From Within a swerve if you see him, pal.

2pm **WARGASM** make perfect sense on a day headlined by Enter Shikari. Rave

rock meets nu metal meets messy punk in a high-energy ball of electro zaniness. Vocalists Sam Matlock and Milkie Way charge from one side of the stage to the other, like a game of irrepressible punk ping-pong. Wait, we've just had a great idea for a new festival game...

2.14pm "Do you ever get those times where you feel homicidal… like you wanna kill somebody?" Milkie asks. Not since we muted the words '5G' and 'personal freedom' on Twitter. Ah, god bless that lovely, lovely mute button.

2.26pm The band go out with their cover of N.E.R.D's *Lapdance*, with an added burst of Metallica's *Fuel*. It causes pandemonium in the first ten or so rows of the Download crowd, and while there's a seriously scrappy element to Wargasm's set today, you can't fault the connection they have with their audience. This is their first UK festival performance and already they're showing signs of being future crowd-killers. You love to see it.

2.59pm Wargasm drummer Ryan has already hobbled his way into the guest area. "That was mental, totally surreal – it didn't feel like it was happening while we were on. What an insane way to start playing festivals!" he exclaims. Quite honestly, we'd have to agree with you there, mate.

3.02pm **A**'s vocalist Jason Perry is wearing a Deliveroo box on his back as he takes to the stage. KFC please, pal. Ours is a Zinger Tower Meal.

3.16pm "Are there any anti-vaxxers out there?" says Jason to the crowd. "Maybe you could all do a literal wall of death!" Little bit of politics there from JP. Who says rock can't still engage with the important questions?!

3.17pm Jason mocks the age of the audience and asks for a walking, age-appropriate circle-pit, before playing the leisurely *Here We Go Again (I Love Lake Tahoe)*.

3.18pm This is ludicrous, joyous fun. A have confused people more than Conjurer, but their sheer personality seems to have won the crowd over. They might not have been in *Hammer* for about 20 years, but we're glad to see them back!

3.21pm SUN! ACTUAL SUN!

3.28pm A end with *Nothing*, because of course they do. Download Pilot obediently loses its shit to one of the biggest singalongs of the day.

3.39pm "I am shite-ing myself," admits **VUKOVI** vocalist Janine Shilstone. You wouldn't know from the bravado of her band's sound – hard-hitting bouncy rock with a shade of Marmozets – and her utterly astounding vocal prowess. This is a band to watch.

Employed To Serve's Justine Jones demands carnage

HOW WAS IT FOR YOU?

EMPLOYED TO SERVE

HOW WAS THE SET?
Justine Jones "We nailed it, we could not have done better, I feel like we should headline. What a show for people to watch – I wish I was them! Ha ha!"

DID YOU HAVE ANY SPECIAL PRE-SHOW RITUALS?
"I had a little chat with myself – I'm going to enjoy every second, just in case it's the only one this year. Not to be pessimistic, but just in case. And yeah, I just had a really good time."

HOW EXCITED WERE YOU TO PLAY THE MAIN STAGE AT DOWNLOAD?
"I was stoked, there's no skirting around it. I've always wanted to play a stage that large. It's just real fun to sort of be a part of this… as cheesy as it sounds, *moment*, in history. Hopefully, there's never going to be a show like it again."

IS THERE A FAVOURITE DOWNLOAD MOMENT YOU TRIED TO CHANNEL?
"The last Download I went to [in 2019], Power Trip opened the main stage and that was phenomenal. I really enjoyed that. And then Slipknot headlining was decent."

WHAT IS IT THAT'S SO IMPORTANT ABOUT LIVE MUSIC?
"Live music to me is a good cardio workout, it's fun to hear the riffs, it's fun to feel the bass drum through your ribcage. I've really missed playing and experiencing live music. We're human beings. We need that physical connection – it's just a depressing world without it."

4.05pm There's a gap in *Hammer*-friendly music for the next few hours. Not to worry – we're just enjoying the sights and sounds of the festival. Everybody is in the best of moods, hugs are still being dished out all across the site and there's that unique brand of British festival silliness all over the place. Lovely!
4.39pm Just to prove our point, we get talking to a guy named Pete, who asks us to impersonate Jonathan Davis from Korn. We're not performing monkeys, Pete! We end up doing a little bit of *Twist* for him. You're welcome!

7.05pm A big crowd has gathered for **WHILE SHE SLEEPS**. *Seriously* big. There might only be 10,000 of us here, but when the Sheffield metalcore masters walk onstage, you'd be forgiven for thinking this is your normal 100,000-capacity Download. The noise and elation that greets them is quite something, and the band immediately ride into the title track from this year's wonderful *Sleeps Society* album. Let's. Fucking. Go.
7.16pm Holy shit, it's going off! The electronic refrain of *The Guilty Party* is getting everyone dancing and jumping like we're in Ibiza in 1998.
7.38pm Now we're getting into career-defining territory. Sleeps sound unreal; the guitars are savage and the triple-threat, tag-teamed vocals of Loz Taylor, Sean Long and Mat Welsh are perfectly pitched. People lose their shit as the band peel out the opening groove of *You Are We*. Little do we know it'll be followed by *Four Walls*, *Brainwashed* and *Silence Speaks*. As we said: Holy. Shit. This is career-defining stuff.
7.44pm Loz demands a circle-pit, and the crowd respond by merrily skipping around a punter who's been lifted up by his mates on a camping chair, like they're at a kind of metal bar mitzvah.
7.49pm So, it's still impossible not to lose your shit to that riff at the end of *Brainwashed*, then. Good to know.
7.53pm *'I think the silence speaks VOLUMES!'* roar 10,000 people at the top of their lungs. Spine-tingling, heartwarming, goosebump-inducing, bottom-lip-quivering – this moment will go down in Download folklore.
7.55pm "This year we launched something called 'Sleeps Society'. We wouldn't fucking be here without you" – Loz's words about their Patreons strike a chord and there are literal tears in the crowd.
8.02pm Loz has made his way through the crowd and is sitting on the top of the sound tower. The camera catches him, beaming away, as he surveys the chaos his band have created. It might be the most enduring image that Download Pilot will throw up.
8.10pm While She Sleeps exit. We've just seen a Trivium in 2005 or a Slipknot 2009 right before our eyes. Can we have them back to headline in 2023, please? On this evidence, they could pull it off and then some.

8.17pm It'd take something special to follow that, so it's lucky that **CREEPER** are on hand to close the Second Stage. They bound on and hit us with *Hiding With Boys*. It says much about the quality of the band that they aren't a disappointment in a post-WSS world.

9.36pm Streamers shoot across the field to signal **ENTER SHIKARI**'s arrival. They've been tipped as Download headliners for years, and as a hard-working band with many previous appearances here under their belt, it'd be hard to begrudge them the honour.
10.05pm We're not sure how to define Rou Reynolds' moves, but he definitely looks too cool to be dubbed a 'dad dancer'. Quaking his arms and legs like a twitching jackrabbit, he sets the tone for the crowd as everyone gets down to dance in a state of mass euphoria.
10.06pm Rou dedicates *Anaesthetist* to NHS staff and care workers. During a weekend where it's possible to block out the real world, it's a reminder of why we should all be grateful to be standing in this field right now.
10.09pm Confetti cannons go off as a luminescent rainbow of LED stage lights provide a spectacular backdrop for Enter Shikari's feel-good anthem, *Satellites*. As Rou sings the lines *'We refrain from touch, we are satellites'* and *'Yeah I think it could be love, but I can't show you enough'*, the reality of the past year, of being separated from our friends and loved ones, feels all the more unreal.
10.48pm Shikari close with a raucous, fun-filled run-through of *The Dreamer's Hotel* and a genuinely euphoric *Live Outside*. Rou takes his shirt off and dances around with a look of absolute joy. Has there ever been a band more elated to have headlined this festival?

While She Sleeps prove why they're future headliners

Wargasm bring electro zaniness to the fest

"TODAY WE'RE GONNA DANCE FOR THOSE WE HAVE LOST"

BENJI WEBBE, SKINDRED

Skindred's Benji Webbe: master of ceremonies and bringer of the party

Jesus proves he can surf as well as walk on water

HOW WAS IT FOR YOU?

SKINDRED

HOW ARE YOU FEELING ABOUT PLAYING TODAY?
Benji Webbe "Well, when all this shit kicked off, I actually thought to myself, 'Will we ever play again?' So, when we got the call, I was pretty impressed, honoured, buzzed and excited to know that we were gonna do what we do best, which is rock'n'roll. This means so much; we're not taking it lightly."

WHAT DOES THIS LINE-UP SAY ABOUT THE BRITISH ROCK SCENE?
"This is their time to shine. That's the beautiful thing, man. I look down the list and I see about six bands I know, so for me it's an opportunity for me to [sings] get with the programme. I love America, but it's nice to do the whole UK thing, and it's beautiful the tickets sold so fast and people want to see these bands."

HOW IMPORTANT IN YOUR CAREER HAS DONINGTON BEEN?
"Basically, we were born here. The Newport Helicopter shit I do, that people fucking *demand* I do, was born here. It's just an honour to be at Download."

HOW MANY PEOPLE HAVE YOU HUGGED TODAY?
"The band, the crew and all the rest of it. But if we all tested fucking negative, why can't we hug? But we're bringing the magic, we're happy to be here."

HOW IMPORTANT IS THE EXPERIENCE OF LIVE MUSIC FOR YOU?
"Live music to me is everything. And I believe that when there is an audience in front of me, it's about us all coming together, and that's when the 'BOOM' happens. Without the audience, we're just four assholes in rehearsal."

11.22pm A rammed silent disco tent sings along to *Chop Suey!*. It's magic, and a reminder that after everything else we've been through, we're all united through music. *'WAKE UP!'*

SUNDAY

11.25am The final day is upon us, and we're drowning our sorrows with a hair-of-the-dog beer. Tomorrow we'll have to go back to 'the new normal', and we'd rather stay here forever. Luckily, the Second Stage tent is filling up nicely for **STATIC DRESS**.

11.30am With his bob haircut and crop top, frontman Olli Appleyard comes on like Brian Molko reborn, yet the music sounds like 2000s post-hardcore. By raiding the past, ironically they capture the zeitgeist – and it's thrilling.

12.01pm "We are **SAINT AGNES**, welcome to our Sunday sermon!" declares Kitty A Austen, before they launch into some unhinged rock'n'roll.

12.06pm *'I got a bigger fucking dick than you!'* Kitty spits, lipstick smeared across her face. We're not sure this sermon is Jesus-approved.

12.18pm She smashes her guitar and kicks an amp, before dousing her arms, face and fishnets in fake blood. Her chants of "Aggy aggy aggy!" are met with "Oi! Oi! Oi" from the crowd, and then she draws on the ol' Slipknot trick of getting everyone to crouch down and jump the fuck up. When the set ends, those at the barrier are rewarded with bloody high-fives. It's a touch derivative, but delivered with enough theatre and conviction to hit the mark.

12.32pm Papa's in the house! No, not *the* Papa Emeritus IV, but a beardy festival-goer in red vestments in the Second Stage tent. He arrives just in time for glam pop-metaller **CASSYETTE** to launch into *Dear Goth* and announce *'It's been 666 days since my last confession.'*

1pm Opening with the blistering *Eternal Forward Motion*, Woking's **EMPLOYED TO SERVE** are on a mission to shake people out of the third-day slump.

DOWNLOAD PILOT

"WAKE THE FUCK UP!" Justine Jones growls repeatedly, between massive grins. They're slick, determined and won't settle for anything less than circle-pit carnage.

1.20pm It's audience participation time, as Justine instructs us to scream "THIS! IS! HELL!" – lyrics from their raging new single, *Exist*. Fingers crossed the rest of the new album goes this hard. We're quietly confident.

2pm Off the back of last year's ace, Deftones-approved *I Let It In And It Took Everything*, anticipation is sky-high for Merseyside's **LOATHE**, so it's a bummer they come out sounding punishingly muddy, with Kadeem France's vocals often lost. Still, you can tell their fans are willing them onwards.

2.27pm The sound cuts out altogether, and Kadeem is left to finish *Two-Way Mirror*, and the set, by himself. In a show of support, the crowd sing with him. There's so much love here; they will be back.

2.28pm Felix from Cheshire has the band's name emblazoned on his chest in glittery green writing. "That was amazing," he breathes. "It was emotional, actually – I discovered them in the first lockdown and they became my favourite band. Being able to see them live is absolutely incredible – I had to show my support! It feels incredible to be back."

4.10pm **ELVANA** are like the weirdest wedding band ever, dressed in 50s get-up and covering Nirvana songs – with the odd Elvis standard chucked in for a laugh. We're sure it's what Kurt and the King would have wanted.

4.23pm As if being at a festival during a pandemic wasn't weird enough, the Download Dog gets onstage and shakes his tail to *Hound Dog*. Sure.

4.38pm Smiley-faced Nirvana logo balloons are set loose in the pit. The audience love it. Kurt turns in his grave.

4.50pm **MASSIVE WAGONS** bandleader Barry 'Baz' Mills comes onstage wearing a T-shirt that says 'I shaved my balls for this?' TMI, Baz. TMI.

5:18pm The Lancastrians start singing *The Curry Song*. Sample lyric: *'I say rogan, you say mosh!'* This goes down better than a late-night takeaway after a night off the wagon.

5.35pm Those sound gremlins have reared their ugly heads again, and **THE WILDHEARTS**' Ginger Wildheart isn't happy. "The beginning of the New World, and we walk on and sound like a sack of shit!" he laments after *Suckerpunch*.

5.36pm *Everlone* and *Vanilla Radio* aren't 100%, but they're good enough. The Wildhearts are a perfect afternoon, funtime fest booking, and a forgiving Download Pilot gets its dance on.

Loathe's Kadeem France: fan favourite

Saint Agnes deliver their Sunday sermon

"SCREAM FOR ME, DOWNLOAD!"

MATT TUCK, BULLET FOR MY VALENTINE

5.57pm "This is a waste of time, have a nice day," declares Ginger, before walking off in disgust, so no more Wildhearts for us. You can understand his decision, but it's a huge letdown, especially since the band have such a close relationship with their fans. We're not gonna let it ruin our day, though.

5.59pm To cheer us up, Team *Hammer* assemble for ice cream. The best bit? The cones are black! Goth cones!

7pm With Bullet For My Valentine headlining tonight, we catch up with festival-goer Ben from South Wales, who's wrapped in a giant Welsh flag. "It doesn't feel too different to the usual Downloads – it might be smaller, but the atmosphere is exactly the same, and that atmosphere is why I come every year," he says. "I'm hoping Bullet give us a great set and a cheeky look at some of their new songs – especially because they've just released one!"

7.02pm The field's already fuller than it's been for both headliners, as AC/DC's *Thunderstruck* blares out of the PA, followed by **SKINDRED**'s intro remix of the *Imperial March*. Arghhhh!

7.05pm Master Of Ceremonies Benji Webbe emerges in a red, sequined suit, and *Stand For Something* goes off. What a legend. What a band.

7.12pm Skindred might be the ultimate party band, but they also stand for empathy and unity, and the significance of playing Download Pilot after 15 months of harrowing global chaos is not lost on them. "Some of us have lost family members, some of us have lost fucking friends, but today we're gonna dance for those we've lost," he says, before the audience oblige during *Doom Riff* and *Pressure*.

7.46pm Benji turns the banter level up to 11, pulling a child from the crowd, slinging him over his shoulder… and calling him a fat bastard. Benji!

7.59pm Bad news, says Benji. He's just been told we're not allowed to do the Newport Helicopter because of COVID-19. So he gets on the 'phone' to 'Boris Johnson' "Alright, cunt… nobody here's got fucking COVID!"

8.03pm The Newport Helicopter has lift-off! During closer *Warning*, the sky is full of whirling shirts and our hearts are full of euphoria. If Skindred had been tonight's headliners, everyone would've gone home satisfied. As it is, we still have Bullet to look forward to.

8.07pm There's been intermittent rain this weekend, but the grey clouds have given way to a heavenly pink sunset, and metalheads are celebrating by limbo-ing under a line of taped-

together beer cans. Even Gandalf is joining in the fun.

9.35pm BULLET FOR MY VALENTINE open with *Don't Need You* and, as punter Ben hoped for, thunderous new single *Knives*, backed by an arena-perfect light show. They've waited for a Download headlining slot for years, and fill the stage with ease. It's easy to take home-grown talent like Bullet for granted while hyping up similar bands across the Atlantic, but they've been honing their stage show for years, and it shows.
9.57pm There are already moshpits aplenty, but when *The Poison*'s *4 Words (To Choke Upon)* starts up, the crowd really lose their shit. Suddenly we're back in 2005, and we don't hate it.

10.26pm "Scream for me, Download!" yells frontman Matt Tuck, during *Scream Aim Fire*. Bet that felt good.
10.36pm Matt doesn't speak much, but when he does, it's from the heart. "It is our honour to be closing out this pilot festival," he says. "My fucking heart's exploding."
10.37pm Benji Webbe returns to sing a ridiculous version of Maiden's *Run To The Hills*. He's holding what we presume is a lyric sheet, but still manages to mangle the words to one of the most famous songs in our history, and even sneaks in a bit of *Nobody*. God love him.
10.45pm Tonight's setlist is a greatest hits selection from across Bullet's discography (with the exception of 2013's *Temper Temper*), but the encore features the triple blow of 2004/5's *Tears Don't Fall, Hand Of Blood* and *Waking The Demon*. Fired up by nostalgia, circle-pits are had, friends are hugged and lyrics are screamed. Bullet have a solid arsenal, and they've finally been able to deploy it at Download's prime time.

11pm As the lights go down on the Main Stage and the crowds disperse to their tents or the silent disco, the big screens display a message: 'Thanks for doing your bit to help open up live music.' We take a minute to drink in the moment.

Moshing for science has been the most fun we've had in ages, and leaving Download is a huge comedown. With any luck, the data will allow more of our favourite bands to return to the stage, and Download proper to go ahead in 2022.

"It did feel weird having a mini Download, but I loved it," says booker Kam. "But I cannot wait for next year!"

With you there, sir. Neither can we.

TICKETS FOR DOWNLOAD 2022 ARE ON SALE NOW. SEE DOWNLOADFESTIVAL.CO.UK

Bullet For My Valentine's Matt Tuck belts out their greatest hits

HOW WAS IT FOR YOU?

BULLET FOR MY VALENTINE

HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE BACK AT DOWNLOAD?
Matt Tuck "We've gone from sitting in the house planning the new single and album campaign, to headlining Download. It's been a bit of a whirlwind. I couldn't be happier to be here."

DOES IT FEEL COOL TO BE ABLE TO SAY THAT, AFTER TODAY, YOU WILL HAVE HEADLINED DONINGTON?
"It feels amazing. We've still got our sights on the big one, but this is good enough for now."

WHAT HAVE YOU MISSED ABOUT PLAYING LIVE?
"That interaction with the fans, and having live music connect people. It's become clear that music is an integral part of everyone's lives and live music especially is something that people need. It feels good that this is hopefully a stepping stone in coming back.

YOUR NEW ALBUM IS SELF-TITLED, WHICH FEELS LIKE A STATEMENT OF INTENT. WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO DO THAT?
"We felt the time was right for a self-titled record. We feel it's our best work to date; I think a lot of people are going to be really pleased with the aggression and musicianship on it. It's the heaviest, most aggressive record we've ever done by some distance."

SYSTEM OF A DOWN

RIOTS.
TERR
DEATH THREATS.

TOXICITY

System Of A Down risked it all for *Toxicity*. This past summer, we celebrated the twentieth anniversary of an album that cemented metal's most unlikely superstars

WORDS: DAVE EVERLEY

LARRY MARANO/AVALON

"DO YOU HATE AMERICA?"

Serj Tankian knew he'd be in for a rough ride when he agreed to appear on Howard Stern's radio show on the morning of September 20, 2001. Loudmouthed 'shock jock' Stern was one of America's most infamous DJs. But at that precise moment, System Of A Down's singer happened to be one of America's most infamous rock stars.

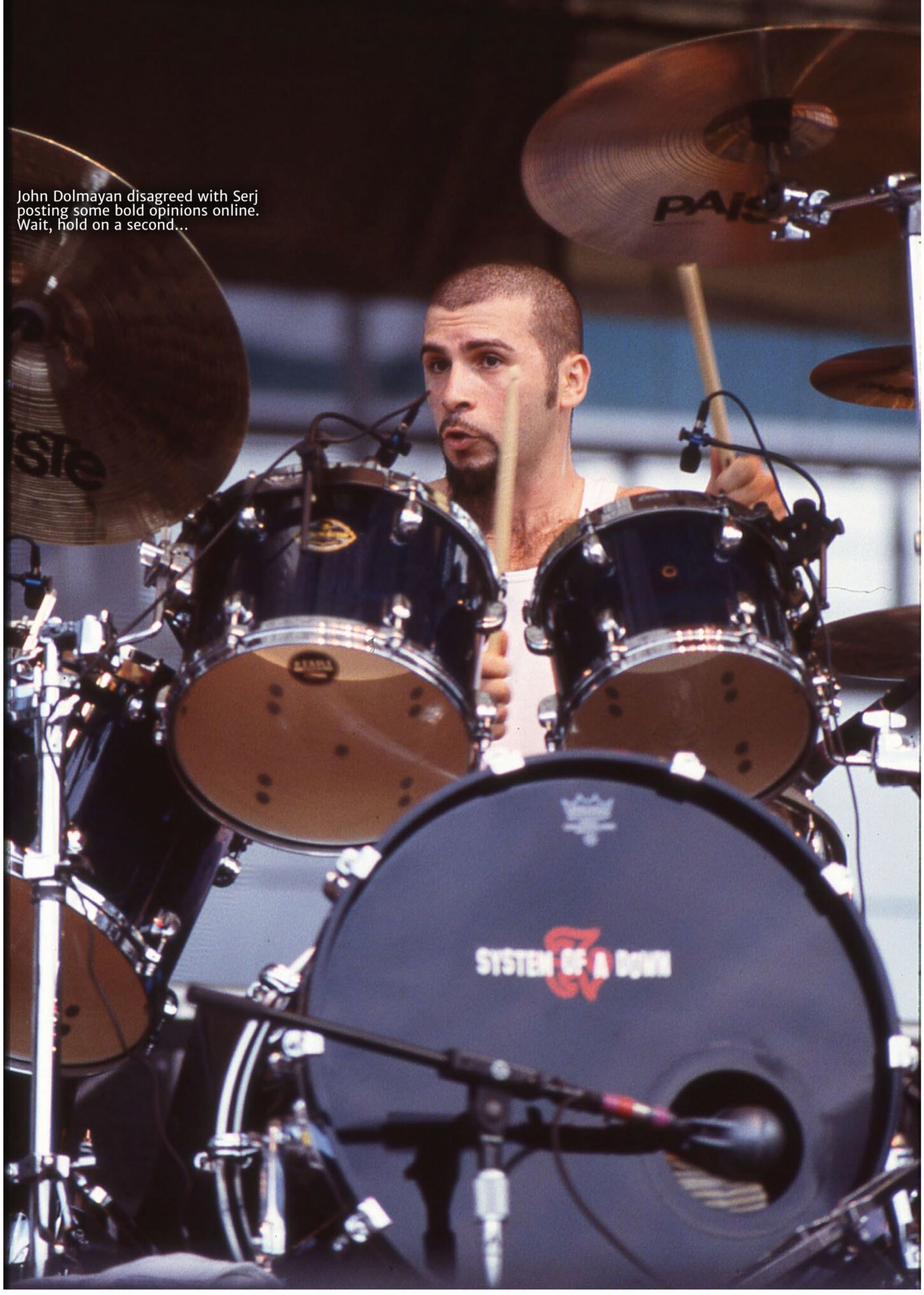
Seven days earlier, the frontman had posted a controversial essay titled *Understanding Oil* on his band's website. In it, he analysed what he saw as the real reasons behind the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon just 48 hours before. The arguments he made were complex yet clear-headed, blaming decades of failed American foreign policy. But the fact remained that Serj Tankian – a man born in the Middle East – was saying the unsayable, and now his patriotism was being questioned on air by Howard Stern: "Do you hate America?"

"I wrote the essay because I was trying to understand it myself, and it really backfired," says Serj today. "They had been talking shit about what I said on the *Howard Stern Show*, mischaracterising my words and intentions. He wanted me on to explain my words. I had to get on and defend myself."

All of that would have been chaotic enough at the best of times, but System Of A Down had released their second album, *Toxicity*, a week prior to the 9/11 attacks. That record was a dazzling carnival of ideas that disentangled System from the all-pervading nu metal scene they'd been bundled in with a few years earlier. Now the band were on the verge of something bigger and much more important.

Serj Tankian survived his on-air entanglement with Howard Stern. For all the controversy, *Toxicity* proved to be a game-changer for System Of A Down, transforming them from cult oddballs into a powerful unifying force. Twenty years later, it stands as one of modern metal's most significant albums – a success story shaped by riots, bans, controversy, turmoil and the kind of world-altering event that no one could see coming.

It's easy to forget just how strange System of A Down were when their self-titled debut album landed in June 1998. Early publicity photos of the band looking like shaven-headed prison-yard escapees (Serj excepted)



John Dolmayan disagreed with Serj posting some bold opinions online. Wait, hold on a second...

did little justice to their music, which could switch from psychotic waltz to death metal roar in a heartbeat.

System had been kicking around the LA club scene at the birth of what would come to be known as nu metal, but their surreal musical Halloween parade had little in common with the performative angst or dick-swinging braggadocio that characterised that scene. Neither did the band themselves – their Armenian-American heritage simultaneously defined them and set them apart. No one else was singing about the history of geo-political conflict (as they did on *War?*), or calling out the Turkish government for refusing to acknowledge a state-sanctioned genocide dating back more than 80 years (as they did in pretty much every interview).

"There were a lot of sceptics, because we were trying to promote an Armenian rock band, which hadn't been done before," says Dino Paredes, A&R manager at label American Recordings and the man who brought them to the attention of label head Rick Rubin. "Back then, if you were different and 'weird', that was a liability. With this band, it wasn't. It was a positive factor."

Something about the kaleidoscopic blitz of System's music clicked with a generation bombarded by the escalating sensory assault of late 90s pop culture (it didn't hurt that they had a star-making label boss and producer like Rick Rubin in their corner).

Ted Stryker, a DJ on taste-making Los Angeles alternative rock radio station KROQ, was the first person to play System's debut single *Sugar* on the radio in the LA area, if not the entire country. "I'd seen them play [Sunset Strip club] The Roxy, and

FRANK WHITE

System Of A Down: being different and 'weird' was not a liability for them

STEPHANIE CABRAL

you'd have thought it was Guns N' Roses or Mötley Crüe playing given the amount of people who were there," says Ted. "The first time I played *Sugar*, the phone lines lit up. It wasn't just their fans, it was people going: 'What *is* that? What's the story with these guys? People were hooked from that second."

System Of A Down wasn't an out-of-the-box success, but by the beginning of the new millennium it had sold upwards of half a million copies in the US (bagging the band a spot on the high-profile compilation *Chef Aid: The South Park Album* in the process). By the time they entered Hollywood's Cello Studios with Rick Rubin to record the follow-up, they had the wind in their sails and more than 40 songs to choose from.

"Everything was starting to happen for us," says guitarist Daron Malakian. "We were playing bigger places ourselves, opening for bigger bands in arenas. With the second album, it felt like we were ready to take on the world."

This time around, everything would be bigger, louder, heavier, bolder. Daron promised "12 tracks of guitar on each song", though that barely did justice to the musical and lyrical inventiveness that ran through the new material. Tracks such as *Prison Song* and *Needles* doubled down on the why-use-one-idea-when-half-a-dozen-will-do? approach of the debut, while the lyrics Serj and Daron brought to the table were enigmatic and impenetrable but never less than vivid (what the hell does *'Wired were the eyes of a horse on a jet pilot'* mean anyway?).

"IT FELT LIKE WE WERE READY TO TAKE ON THE WORLD"

DARON MALAKIAN

The sessions were hard work, but fun. "There were late, late hours," says Daron. "I was in my early 20s and there was a lot of experimentation of substances. Let's leave it at that…"

The energy in the room could easily boil over, and often did. A trivial argument over a single word in the album's second song, *Needles*, escalated to epic proportions. Serj wanted to sing, 'Pull the tapeworm out of my ass' but Daron and bassist Shavo Odadjian were having none of it: "That doesn't sound cool," they told the frontman. They eventually settled on replacing "my ass" with "your ass", though only after a bust-up that Rick Rubin later claimed could have ended System there and then. "I felt like the band could have broken up over the lyric," the producer said. "It was so extreme, but it speaks to the passion in the band."

Things occasionally got physical. At one point Daron and drummer John Dolmayan got into it with each other over some long-forgotten difference of opinion. John hit his bandmate in the face, busting his lip. Daron responded by whacking his aggressor over the head with a microphone stand.

"Shavo and Serj were looking at us saying, 'Awww, man, we're done'," Daron recalled in 2005. "But right after we fought, we took each other to the hospital and got stitched up right next to each other. Both of us were sitting there laughing, saying, 'This is one of the coolest moments in the history of our band.'"

Other musicians occasionally dropped by. Mike Patton was one. "I felt stupid not asking him to guest ▶

on a track," a rueful Serj later said. Another was Tom Morello, who delivered his verdict on the songs that would appear on *Toxicity*: "That's crazy-person music."

Much of the album did sound crazy on the surface, but there was often a method to their madness. *Prison Song* may have been deliberately disjointed, flipping from scratchy, jerky oddness to adamantium-plated riffs and full-throated death-roars, but it was an ideal, if unique vehicle for Serj's damning indictment of the US penal system. The title track cast a jaundiced eye over the band's hometown of Los Angeles, the frontman whisper-roaring like a street-corner shaman standing in the middle of Hollywood and Vine. And while the jokey *Bounce* clearly used a pogo stick metaphor to describe an orgy, what exactly head-spinning single *Chop Suey!* and climactic slow-burner *Aerials* were about was less apparent.

Ironically, the album's most straightforward song was the one with the most potential to cause controversy. The semi-ballad *ATWA* drew its inspiration from jailed cult leader Charles Manson's proto-green eco-manifesto – the title stood for 'Air, Trees, Water and Animals'. Admitting the influence of a homicidal, racist psychopath would be cause for instant cancellation these days, but back then Daron Malakian – the song's chief lyricist – saw no issue with it, despite the likes of Axl Rose being criticised for flirting with Manson's songs and imagery a few years earlier. "There are things that I agree with Manson on," said Daron, explaining the inspiration. "There are others that I don't. He's got some racial views that aren't exactly mine…"

In the end, this Manson-inspired micro-anthem barely raised an eyebrow. There was controversy around the corner, but at that point no one could conceive of where it would come from.

And anyway, before that, there was the riot.

Monday September 3, 2001, was Labor Day in the US. Anyone travelling down Schrader Boulevard in central Hollywood in their car might have noticed people streaming into the otherwise anonymous parking lot where System Of A Down were due to play a launch show for *Toxicity* ahead of its release the following day.

Advance buzz around the album was deafening. *Chop Suey!* – that mad, shapeshifting track that sounded like four different songs clamouring for our attention – had been glued to US radio and MTV since it was released as the album's first single three weeks earlier. A series of summer shows in Europe indicated that appetite was only intensifying after the success of their debut album (footage from August's Reading Festival shows the vast crowd absolutely going off when the band drop *Chop Suey!*).

Serj Tankian. Spoiler alert: he doesn't hate America

"WE GOT STITCHED UP RIGHT NEXT TO EACH OTHER"
DARON MALAKIAN

This launch gig was intended to bottle that excitement. Such was the anticipation that some kids had been sleeping there overnight, while others arrived hours before the gates were due to open.

"We'd promised fans on the radio that we'd play this free outdoor show in this huge parking lot," remembers Serj. "I guess we were expecting 3,000 to 4,000 people to show up."

That figure turned out to be inaccurate to the tune of several thousand. Depending on the source, between 10,000 and 15,000 people were crammed into the Hollywood parking lot that afternoon. "I remember a lot of people and not a lot of security," says Dino Paredes.

The authorities were concerned that it could be dangerous and refused to let the show begin. The scheduled start time of 4pm passed and the crowd began to get restless. As the minutes ticked past, their frustration grew. And then it was announced that the show would not be taking place due to safety issues. The backdrop ▶

STEPHANIE CABRAL

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behind the stage was taken down, which is when everything exploded.

Serj and his bandmates watched the riot erupt at one of their own gigs from across the street. System were holed up in a small club where they had planned to prepare for the show. As soon as fans broke the barriers and stormed the stage, he knew the band had to do something.

"We had this horrific idea that someone might get seriously hurt," he says. "We were really concerned for everyone's well-being."

Serj and his bandmates tried to convince the authorities to let them go onstage. It would calm everyone down, they reasoned. They could tell the crowd they would arrange another show in a proper venue to make up for it. The local fire marshal was having none of it.

"They said, 'Absolutely not'," recalls Serj. "In fact they threatened to arrest any of us trying to make it to the stage."

Serj was incensed. He grabbed his bandmates. "I went, 'Fuck these guys, let's go and do this, let 'em arrest us, who cares?'" he says. "And then my lawyer grabbed me and went, 'This is Los Angeles, they will sue the fuck out of your band, they will take everything from you. I remember being extremely stressed, thinking, 'I'm doing fucking music, this is not how it was supposed to be.'"

Local TV news crews swarmed in to capture the carnage. By the time things finally calmed down, six people had been arrested and more than $30,000 of damage had been done to the band's gear.

"I wasn't thinking about what this meant for the record, or whether it reflected how big we were becoming," says Serj. "I was too busy looking at the news on TV and seeing fans getting trampled by horse-riding LA police. I mean, shit, we inadvertently started an LA riot and we didn't even do anything."

On the plus side, it showed that System Of A Down could unite people despite being nowhere near a stage, even if it was in the form of a riot. Similarly, the media coverage it prompted proved there really is no such thing as bad press – although thanks to Serj Tankian's very public

"I SAW FANS GETTING TRAMPLED"

SERJ TANKIAN

System Of A Down (left to right): John Dolmayan, Daron Malakian, Serj Tankian, Shavo Odadjian

criticism of the US establishment, that notion would soon be severely tested.

Toxicity was released on Tuesday, September 4, 2001. A week later, on September 11, it entered the US Billboard charts at No.2, just behind R'n'B star Alicia Keys' debut album, *Songs In A Minor*. Within a few hours it had leapfrogged the latter to claim the No.1 spot after the chart's compilers added on 50,000 sales of a limited-edition CD version they had overlooked.

The band barely had time to register their triumph. At 8.46am, the first of two planes flew into one of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan. Seventeen minutes later, another plane hit the second tower. Suddenly, everything changed.

"From a label point of view, it was all about trying to figure out what it meant for the band," says Dino Paredes. "And then Serj felt compelled to make his statement…"

Serj Tankian had more on his mind than chart positions or album sales. The singer was born in Beirut, and spent his early years living in Lebanon before moving to the US in 1975. He was more plugged into Middle Eastern politics than most native Westerners. He knew that America's failed foreign policies were the root cause of the 9/11 attacks. And he said as much.

Serj posted the *Understanding Oil* essay on System's site without telling his bandmates. It was quickly taken down, though not before the shit had hit the fan. "If you read it, what he says is very accurate," says Dino. "But it caused a bit of a backlash."

That backlash was as swift as it was predictable. Howard Stern was a high-profile critic, but others were no less determined to deplore Serj as an anti-American and a traitor to his country. He received abuse and death threats. Even members of his own band were aghast. "You're a smart guy, what the fuck are you doing? Are you trying to get us killed?" John Dolmayan asked his bandmate. "I'm so sorry, but it's the truth," responded Serj, apologising for his actions but not his intent.

While the frontman attempted to pour oil on troubled waters via his Howard Stern interview, a potential shitstorm was brewing on another front. In the days after 9/11, giant US media conglomerate Clear Channel clandestinely circulated a memo list of "lyrically questionable" songs that DJs were advised not play – a ban in all but name. *Chop Suey!*, with its reference to *'self-righteous suicide'*, was right there at the top of the list.

THE NUMBERS BEHIND TOXICITY

Crazy sales and even crazier streams

44

Number of minutes the album takes up in total, including bonus hidden track *Arto*

1

Billboard chart number *Toxicity* peaked at. It peaked there in Canada, too!

220,000

Copies of *Toxicity* sold in the US in its first week on sale

12 MILLION

The number of copies it's estimated to have sold since

15,000

Estimated number of fans involved in the *Toxicity* release show riot

3,213

Total number of times *Toxicity* songs have been played live

1 BILLION

Number of views for *Chop Suey!* on Youtube

1.7 BILLION

Total number of combined streams of all *Toxicity* tracks on Spotify

73

Current score out of 100 awarded to the album via Metacritic. Bit harsh?!

165

Total number of songs banned from the radio following 9/11, including *Chop Suey!*

SOURCES: SPOTIFY, YOUTUBE, SETLIST.FM, KERRANG!, METACRITIC, BILLBOARD.

ALL NUMBERS CORRECT AT TIME OF GOING TO PRESS

"In music, that's a badge of honour," says System guitarist Daron Malakian. "So many great rock bands have been banned. It's almost like you're not part of the cool group if you're not banned once or twice. I think it made the song more popular."

The essay and the Clear Channel memo were two separate flashpoints, but either could have sunk *Toxicity*. Factor in the pall of grief, fear and confusion hanging over everything, and System's path forward suddenly looked a lot more uncertain and chaotic than it did two weeks earlier.

The litmus test would be their co-headlining tour with Slipknot, whose second album, *Iowa*, had been released the week before *Toxicity*. The six-week run would be billed under the banner The Pledge Of Allegiance Tour – an ironic reference to the patriotic custom of pledging allegiance to the US flag, which looked a lot less smart in the wake of Serj's *Understanding Oil* essay.

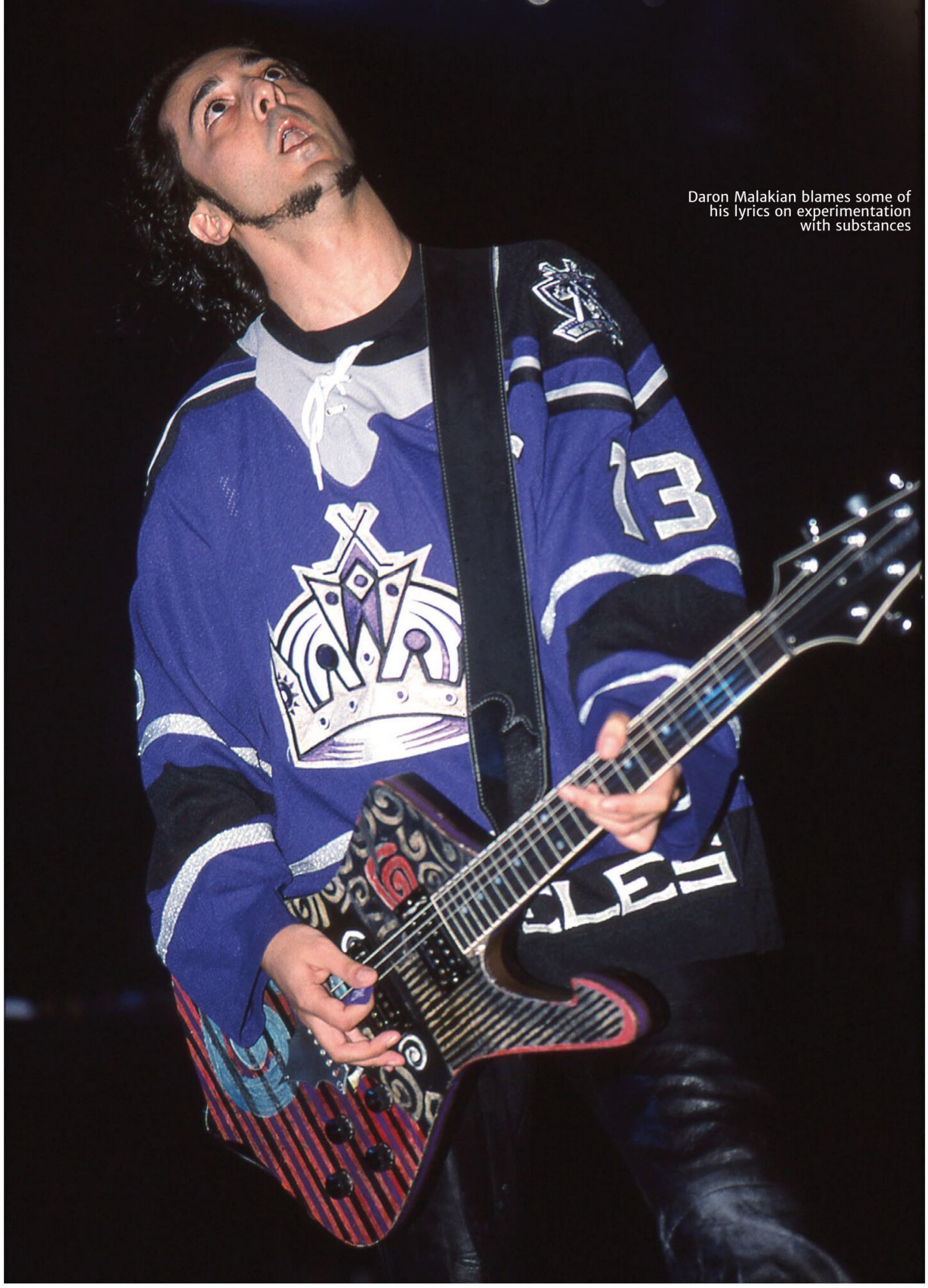
"There was this intense stress," says the singer of the tour. "There's terrorist threats every day, I'm getting shit for activism and speaking truth to power – all these different threat levels. And we're out there in front of 20,000 people every night. We're thinking, 'Are we safe? Are they safe?'"

Thankfully, no harm came to either the band or their fans. At least not from terrorists – Shavo Odadjian was allegedly beaten up and racially insulted by security guards when he was trying to get backstage at a show in Grand Rapids, Michigan, prompting the bassist to file a lawsuit against the security company

"I had my pass on, and they still kinda beat me up and threw me out of the arena," Shavo told *Metal Hammer* in 2017. "I'd just gotten offstage, but these motherfuckers just didn't like me for whatever reason. It was a stressful time."

In the end, the stresses that surrounded the release of the album and the subsequent tour were worth it. *Toxicity* was certified triple platinum in the US in November 2002 for sales of three million copies. The title track and *Aerials* followed *Chop Suey!* into heavy rotation.

The songs that Tom Morello described as "crazy-person music" had struck a chord in those unprecedented times. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, people either needed a chance to let off steam, a means of expressing defiance or simply something they could lose themselves in to forget about the horrors of the world. With *Toxicity*, System Of A Down provided all three.



Daron Malakian blames some of his lyrics on experimentation with substances

"THERE WERE TERRORIST THREATS EVERY DAY"
SERJ TANKIAN

It was significant on a cultural level, too. Nu metal had become drunk and bloated on its own success, and its star was waning. While *Toxicity* was far from a nu metal record, it was the last massive-selling album from a band associated with the original scene. Disturbed and Linkin Park would both outstrip it commercially with their respective second albums, *Believe* and *Meteora*, but they were one step behind – System had been in the trenches almost from the start. With *Toxicity*, they killed what they'd helped create.

"Do we even fall in the nu metal category?" says Daron. "I don't think we sound like any of those bands. Personally I think we sound like System Of A Down."

And System Of A Down themselves? *Toxicity* may have unified everyone who heard it – it's a rare metal fan who doesn't love or at least respect the album – but it marked the last time the band that made it truly felt like a unit. *Steal This Album!* (featuring tracks left over from the *Toxicity* sessions, released to foil online pirates), *Mezmerize* and *Hypnotize* were all works of varying greatness, but none of them had *Toxicity*'s sense of purpose. There was nothing like it before, and there's been nothing like it since. Not for System Of A Down and not for anyone.

FOR MORE ON SYSTEM OF A DOWN, SEE HTTPS://SYSTEMOFADOWN.COM

FRANK WHITE

SONIC YOUTH · LP
I STOLE MY SISTERS BOYFRIEND. IT WAS ALL WHIRLWIND, HEAT, AND FLASH. WITHIN A WEEK WE KILLED MY PARENTS
HIGHWAY TO HELL
CLASSIC ROCK
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BACKXWASH

EXPRESS YOURSELF

Fierce, fearless and as boundary-smashing as any artist to grace these pages, Backxwash is the sound of 2021. In July, she gave us her amazing life story

WORDS: EMMA JOHNSTON • PICTURES: CHACHI REVAH

Ashanti Mutinta, AKA Backxwash, is the rapper the metal world didn't know it needed until she reinvented heavy music with last year's astonishing album, *God Has Nothing To Do With This Leave Him Out Of It*. A sublime mix of perfectly pitched metal samples, a bleak, horrorcore aesthetic, a visceral rage and lyrical vulnerability, it genuinely sounds like nothing else, taking her from open mic jam sessions to award-winning acclaim at lightning speed.

Now she returns with *I Lie Here Buried With My Rings And My Dresses*, an even more anguished work that delves into the darkest parts of her psyche over swathes of industrial noise.

"It's kind of like when you're watching a horror movie, and you're anticipating the happy ending, the ending of triumph," she says, explaining the title via Zoom from her adopted hometown of Montreal. "But this is like *The Blair Witch Project* where that doesn't happen, and the protagonist just bleeds out. Pain is the central theme to the project, and this is me not fighting back. I think there was more of a fighting chance with the previous one. This one is kind of like being OK with the pain and just bleeding out."

That we're talking to Ashanti at all today is a minor miracle. Clean, sober, and having accepted her own gender identity and come out as a trans woman in recent years, she's weathered more storms, wrestled more demons, than most of us can imagine, and lives to tell the tale. But the new record tells of a bleak alternative reality, the one she was living in 2012, when her main aim in life was to end it.

"I thought there was no hope," she explains. "In 2012 I had systematically planned that I was going to die at the end of the year. I was drunk, I was on drugs and just not in the right mind space. My brother came to live in Canada, so I postponed it; I thought I'd wait until he settled in. That became three months, then six months, then a year. Until eventually I never followed through with it. I struggle a lot with suicidal thoughts, and I thought it would be nice just to lay all of that out on a record. I'd never gone as graphic as I did on this record. There's a mixture of this heavy industrial sound over this really graphic, violent content."

Ashanti was born and raised in Zambia, to a deeply religious family. She got into hip hop through her sister's CD collection – Jay-Z, Nas, The Notorious B.I.G. At 12 years old she was experimenting with making beats with a crew of like-minded friends and being taken to rap battles by her older cousins. "We thought we were going to be the next Wu-Tang or something," she says with a laugh.

At the same time, she discovered Linkin Park – her favourite band – Black Sabbath ("that terrified me") and nu metal, before moving on to Nine Inch Nails, black metal, doom, Candlemass, System Of A Down and post-rock albums such as 2000's *Lift Your Skinny Fists Like Antennas To Heaven* by Godspeed You! Black Emperor – a band who would have a huge personal influence in the future. Inspired, she tried to mimic what metal drums and guitars would sound like if they were plotted on a computer.

"I love the existentialism in metal as well," she says. "Growing up in such a Christian household, listening to that is very taboo. But there's a certain power to sneaking out and listening to it, because it's like, 'Hmm, why don't you want me to hear this?' Listening to it has you questioning a lot of stuff that you were told; there's freedom to that."

Religion was the cornerstone of her life back in Zambia, and her struggles with the belief system in which she was raised rage on *God Has Nothing...* Sleeping, waking, eating – everything was shrouded in prayer, while fear of incurring the wrath of God was a constant companion. Different denominations came and went – Jehovah's Witness, Seventh Day Adventist, "Catholic for two weeks", Pentecostal – none of them particularly welcoming to members of the LGBTQ+ community.

"IN MY CHRISTIAN HOUSEHOLD, METAL WAS TABOO"

ASHANTI MUTINTA

"Your moral compass is determined on whether it makes sense from a religious standpoint, which is not really the best environment for a queer person like me to grow up in," Ashanti says. "You're not given the luxury to question all of these structures. There's one Bible verse that terrified me: 'Our Lord is a jealous Lord.' That freaked the fuck out of me. I was just like, 'Jesus, I'm afraid to even think right now because I don't wanna get struck down'. We thought the only way to protect each other was by staying true to the word of God. But I'm learning that, growing up, there's a lot of trauma that's been imposed on you."

Because of this, Ashanti didn't come out until she moved to Montreal, but deep down, she says, she always knew. An androgynous child, her peers would make fun of her and call her weird.

"There was one moment when my auntie came to help us get ready for school," she remembers. "My auntie didn't know if I was a boy or girl so she brought me this dress, and I just took it. My mum came running, 'No, no, that's a boy!' And my perspective on myself changed until I grew up and all of that started to make sense. For god's sake, your favourite Disney movie was Mulan! That should have explained everything! You're crying during the gender-bending scenes! That's why it's always so heartwarming to me to see kids of 13, 14, who have the full support of their parents. Imagine your parents supporting you all the way, without you having to hide anything."

These days, after a brief atheist phase when she first moved to Canada, Ashanti has embraced the spirituality of her tribe, the Tumbuka, which is all about respecting and honouring the ancestors. Good things, she explains, have started to happen since she took that path.

"Signs started happening," she explains. "One was surreal. I was working on a video, we needed to make a mask to represent my tribe. As I was making my mask, we were in these tall buildings in the city, and this hawk just comes to the window and sits there and stares at us. It felt like the ancestors were just saying, 'This is fine, I notice what you're doing and it's OK.' I like to reflect the spirituality in my songs as well. I like it because it aligns with my morals; it doesn't feel like I'm being brainwashed, it's just like this is where I need to be."

The physical way out of her stifling background was a computer science course in British Columbia. But it wasn't the escape she'd hoped for. Feeling trapped and uninspired in a drab small city, while still working out her identity, things got dark. The drug-taking started, and the thoughts of self-harm and taking her own life began to run rampant.

"I didn't want to feel anything," she says. "I used to take a lot of MDMA. It can have serious detrimental side effects on you, but I didn't care, I was really addicted to being able to feel some sort of happiness, some sort of bliss during that point. That was just my way of numbing it. I had a huge drinking problem as well."

Isolated, depressed and full of self-loathing, it got to the point where Ashanti was chugging any pills she could get her hands on. A danger to herself, clearly something had to give. The move to Montreal provided her salvation – although that got off to a rocky start when she found herself living above a racist neighbour.

Montreal is a deeply creative city, and Ashanti swiftly fell in love with it. She found a network of venues putting on jam sessions, noise shows and cyphers – a type of rap battle – that reignited her love of music and reawakened her creative muse. Working in IT by day, she was sowing the

seeds of the Backxwash project by night, starting with a drunken performance at a local open mic night.

"I think I made an ass of myself, but it was so fun," she says. "I felt that euphoria from when you're rapping and the crowd is responding to it."

Surrounded by like-minded people, it was here that she finally felt free to embrace her own identity and come out as trans. Her family were not supportive – she says she's back in touch with her sister, who lives in Australia, a little bit, but isn't really in contact with anyone back in Zambia. A few close friends let her down, too, but finally she's able to express herself *as* herself.

"I first came out as bi," she says. "There was a moment when I had to apply for my work permit to stay in Canada, and I was afraid that if I got sent back, it would be over for me in terms of how I can express myself. I thought that would be the end of it, but it was just the beginning, I'm a trans woman now. I want to make sure the people around me are OK with the new developments. If they stop talking to me that's great because I don't want those types of people around me anyway."

After taking a while to hone her sound – initially, she says, she compromised too much – she hit on gold with *God Has Nothing...*, when she finally let her love of the dark side, horror movies and her own vulnerability run wild. Bigged up by her heroes such as Godspeed You! Black Emperor and rapper Danny Brown, the final vindication came when she won the prestigious Canadian Polaris Music Prize.

There was a slight hitch when she was forced to remove the album from streaming sites due to uncleared samples – including Ozzy's unmistakable wail from *Black Sabbath* by Black Sabbath – something she describes as "educational". This time, on *I Lie Here Buried With My Rings And My Dresses*, the only musical sample is Godspeed's *Static*. Guitars and screams are provided by Ada Rook of noise-pop duo Black Dresses, while other sounds come from field recordings – tribal singing, a cat, pain therapy tapes ("my version of a parental advisory warning to say that topics in here might be heavy"). It's a masterpiece for us, and raw therapy presented in all its naked anguish for her. And while it details the most harrowing period of her life, it represents a bold and bright future, one that she is more than ready to face head-on.

"I'm really happy right now," she says. "The gift of being able to express yourself as freely as possible is taken for granted, but it's probably one of the most important things that you can ever obtain. Never let anyone try to steal that from you."

***I LIE HERE BURIED WITH MY RINGS AND MY DRESSES* IS OUT NOW. SEE BACKXWASH.BANDCAMP.COM**

Ashanti Mutinta: freedom in self-expression

CLIPPED TONES

Ashanti talks us through two key samples on *I Lie Here Buried With My Rings And My Dresses*

TRACK: *666 In Luxaxa*
SAMPLE: Traditional South African singing
"It's from this recording in South Africa of people giving back to the Sangoma, which is like a witch doctor. The sample fit pretty well because the song talks about how these colonists came back in the day and stripped my people of their culture, and implanted religion, Christianity, there. The sample is me embracing my spirituality, and even though it is not from my tribe, I think the sentiment remains the same. You have them giving up to the Sangoma, embracing this witch doctor character, even though they've been told not to."

TRACK: *Burn To Ashes*
SAMPLE: *Static*, Godspeed You! Black Emperor
"I needed a way to end the album on an explosive note, and that one just made sense. I'd been listening to *Raise Your Skinny Fists...* again and it brought me back to all those times and it just made sense to me. I opened for Godspeed in Montreal. They're amazing people. We had three shows, and two of those shows were opened by trans artists, so that's me and another artist, and they donated most of the proceeds for the trans fund in Montreal. For people of their stature and platform, for them to do that is phenomenal."

IRON MAIDEN

82 MINUTES. TEN SONGS. THE SAMURAI.

Senjutsu is a certified heavy metal monster. And, as Bruce Dickinson and Janick Gers told us in an exclusive interview in August, it drove Iron Maiden doolally having to wait two whole years to show it off

WORDS: DOM LAWSON • PICTURES: JOHN McMURTRIE

Bruce cannot wait for you all to hear the new album!

“NICKO CAME IN AND SAID, ‘WHAT THE FUCK ARE WE MAKING A RECORD FOR?!’”

BRUCE DICKINSON

The last 18 months have been a nightmare of frustration and cancelled plans for most musicians, but imagine being Bruce Dickinson. When *Hammer* meets the Iron Maiden singer in London, as the band prepare to unveil their 17th studio album, he has a restless, fiery look in his eyes. Dressed, as has become traditional, in the leisurewear of a dedicated cyclist – dark, plain vest; joggers – he greets us with some expected cheery enthusiasm. But as we unzip the monstrous wonders of the album in question, the mighty *Senjutsu*, it becomes increasingly obvious that Bruce has been going slightly mad waiting for the world to open up again. The last time we spoke to him on the eve of the release of a new Maiden album (2015’s *The Book Of Souls*), he cut a relaxed and relieved figure, the spectre of his battle with throat cancer then receding into the distance. But today, Bruce is visibly excited about what comes next, not least because it turns out that Iron Maiden have been sitting on *Senjutsu* since… hang on a pissing minute… *2019*?! No wonder that he is so clearly delighted that we’ve just been granted a sneak preview of the full album. He leans forward in his chair and grins.

“*Good*, isn’t it?” he says. Yes, mate. It’s fucking great.

Surprisingly, but due to some very obvious logistical reasons, the legendary Brits’ 17th studio record has been gathering dust in a can, quite conceivably in some obscure, subterranean vault and guarded by Eddie’s snarling minions, for the best part of two years. Recorded once again at Guillaume Tell Studio in Paris, with long-time collaborator Kevin Shirley manning the controls, *Senjutsu* came together during a brief pause in live activity following the first part of Maiden’s wildly acclaimed Legacy Of The Beast world tour.

“The plan was to have the album out at the end of Legacy Part 2, which was then postponed, and then postponed again,” Bruce grimaces. “So we’d already made the fucking record and *then* we went on tour, knowing that we’d made it! Nicko came into the studio, before we started making it, all grumpy, saying, ‘What the fuck are we making a record for? Fuck me, I was on holiday!’ Ha ha ha! So we just said that we might as well do it, and thank Christ we did, because the whole world went to shit shortly after the end of the tour.”

Iron Maiden played their last pre-pandemic live show in Santiago, Chile, on October 15, 2019. As deeply unpleasant ▶

Janick Gers: *Senjutsu* is his 10th Maiden studio album

events unfolded around the world, it swiftly became apparent that there would be no further opportunities to complete the Legacy Of The Beast tour for some time. Perhaps even longer than certain people expected.

"I was in lockdown, initially in Paris," says Bruce. "I'm sat on the balcony in Paris, it was a lovely sunny day in March, it was a heatwave and super-hot. I remember talking to Rod [Smallwood, longtime Iron Maiden manager] and I said, 'We should do some facemasks!' and he said, 'Nooooo, we're never gonna do facemasks! This'll all blow over!' Ha ha ha!"

Meanwhile, as global chaos erupted, Iron Maiden had a brand new studio album that they really had to keep secret. And so, they did – secret even from themselves.

"I DIDN'T HEAR THIS ALBUM FOR TWO YEARS"

BRUCE DICKINSON

"At the end of the recording, everybody else had fucked off home, so it was basically me, Steve [Harris] and Kevin in the studio," Bruce recalls. "We played it back a couple of times, said, 'Yeah, that's alright then!' and then that was the last time I heard it for nearly two years. All of us! Nobody in the band had a copy! Steve, in particular, was so paranoid that someone would leak it onto the internet, and probably with some justification, it was locked up in a vault. The next time I heard the album was when we were mixing the Mexico live stuff [2020's live album, *Nights Of The Dead*]. I went round to Steve's, and I said, 'You haven't got a copy of the album, have you?' and he said, 'I think it's on my laptop!' And *he* had only played it a couple of times. He hadn't heard it for ages either, so we said, 'Fuck it, put it on the big speakers!' That was when I was thinking, 'Shit a brick, this is *good*.'"

Bruce is perfectly correct, too. Maiden fans have become accustomed to studio albums of high quality, particularly over the band's triumphant last 20 years, and yet *Senjutsu* sounds and feels somehow bigger, better and more emotionally potent than anything the band have recorded since Bruce and guitarist Adrian Smith returned to the fold in 1999, re-joining bassist Steve Harris, drummer Nicko McBrain and guitarists Dave Murray and Janick Gers as an absurdly successful new decade dawned. Significantly, it is also an album that brims with surprises, albeit all very much filtered through that instantly recognisable Maiden bombast. From the monstrous, rumbling storm of the opening title track and the hazy, proggy grooves of *The Time Machine*, to the bluesy stomp'n'squall of first single *The Writing On The Wall* and *The Parchment*'s prog-fuelled labyrinth of riffs and spiralling melodies, *Senjutsu* delivers more of the glorious, classic Maiden same *and* numerous curveballs at the same time.

"The nice thing is to still be able to think outside the box a little bit," Bruce notes. "*The Writing On The Wall* is a great choice for the first single, and another cool thing is that it is in no way indicative of the rest of the album. It should be called 'The Writing *Off* The Wall'! Ha ha ha!"

But somehow it still sounds like Maiden and couldn't be anybody else. Does it give you a collective thrill, that you can still do something different like that?

"Yeah, exactly. It still sounds like us. When Adrian and I sort of put the song together, Adrian had the riff, because Adrian *always* has the riff. Then off we went. I put the melody over it and the words, and it's just one of those songs that wrote itself, almost. We were like, 'Is this going to fly?' but 'Arry [Steve] loved it. He said, 'Yeah, I quite like that sort of Cajun feel!' We both looked at each other, like, '*Cajun*?! Alright, fair enough!' Ha ha ha! But it's got a great feel to it. You might think you've wandered into a fucking Thunder record or something."

Until the drums kick in…

"Oh yeah, the drumming on the whole album is *ridiculous*. It's so good. Honestly? I think it's the best Nicko's ever drummed. Honest to god, going all the way back to *Piece Of Mind* and *Powerslave*, I don't think he's ever drummed better. He's just so on it."

Although not quite as desperate to be let off the leash as his notoriously chill-deficient frontman, six-stringer Janick Gers is in a comparably buoyant mood when *Hammer* speaks with him for another *Senjutsu* debrief a week later. Endearingly, in the midst of the last two years' abject mayhem, the veteran guitarist has missed out on a couple of major milestones. Late in 2019, he somehow completely failed to celebrate being a member of Iron

Iron Maiden (left to right): Janick Gers, Steve Harris, Bruce Dickinson, Adrian Smith, Dave Murray, Nicko McBrain

"I GOT DEATH THREATS"

Kevin Shirley has produced every Maiden record since 2000's *Brave New World*. He spills the secrets of *Senjutsu*

KEVIN SHIRLEY: GETTY

WHICH TRACKS ON *SENJUTSU* CAME FIRST?
"I don't really remember which order they were done in. I do have a log somewhere, so if I had to give a day-by-day in court, I could. I know that Adrian had the original idea for the title track, *Senjutsu*, which he wrote with Steve, and we used elements of his demo on that. *The Writing On The Wall* came later."

SIX YEARS HAVE PASSED BETWEEN ALBUMS. HOW QUICKLY DID YOU SLIP INTO A ROUTINE, OR WAS IT LIKE STARTING FROM SCRATCH AGAIN?
"We just pick up like the previous session was last week. Janick goes to the Irish pub, Adrian goes fishing, Nicko and Davey play golf, Bruce does something extreme – this time he was fencing with the French national team and then broke his Achilles tendon – and Steve and I just work away in the studio, with Denis [Caribaux] engineering. It's a lot of Groundhog Day, but in a good way."

DO YOU HAVE ANY NERVES ABOUT *SENJUTSU* COMING OUT?
"Well, I've learned that you have to be pretty thick-skinned when dealing with some Maiden fans. In the early days of me producing them, I got emails filled with vitriol and even death threats because I wasn't [late producer] Martin Birch, so you have to let it run off you, like water off a duck's back. But I love the album and I hope the fans like it, too – I can't wait to see these tracks live one day."

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE SONG ON THE ALBUM?
"*Death Of The Celts* might be my favourite. It's got everything modern, 21st-century Maiden is about. A very moody intro, with a very typically Steve Harris acoustic bassline plucking a melody, almost like an old Jethro Tull melody. Bruce tells a historical saga in song with complex melodies and then it hits with heavy, Celtic, lilting guitars. It's a real story, without repeating lyrics... not the stuff singles are made of! And then a nice Adrian solo, another complex music bit, then a gallop, then a singalong Celtic guitar section. I mean, it is Maiden in one song!"

Maiden (and continually whacking Eddie in the bollocks with his guitar) for 30 years. Meanwhile, he sounds genuinely startled to find that *Senjutsu* is his 10th Maiden studio record. Nonetheless, Janick is very, *very* enthusiastic about the new record and makes a point of saying how much he enjoyed the process of making it, "even if it seems a long time ago now!"

"Normally we would come in and rehearse for a few weeks, so we pretty much have all the songs," he continues. "Every now and then we've gone in with an extra song or an extra set of ideas, and we've worked them up in the studio, but this time we learned them and played them, as fresh as we could. We have a band with so many ideas, everyone's bringing things in and everyone's trying to make every song better. There's a real camaraderie about how we write as a band. Everyone wants it to be the best. It's just exciting. Isn't that how it should be? Rather than coming in and knowing exactly what's coming next? You never know what's coming next from Maiden and that's part of the strength of the band."

Maiden's collective enthusiasm for trying new ideas and gently tinkering with the band's esteemed formula seems to have gained momentum in recent times. *Senjutsu* may not feature anything *quite* as ambitious or extravagant as *The Book Of Souls*' 18-minute epic, *Empire Of The Clouds*, but its adventurous spirit is brashly on display throughout.

"Yeah, we're always looking for different avenues," notes Janick. "We're treading the Maiden path and whatever we do sounds like us. It doesn't matter what you bring in. It's always worth bringing something in, even if you're thinking, 'Nah, it's not right for Maiden...'! By the time you've finished playing it with Nicko, with the way he plays and how Steve plays his bass, and the way Dave and Adrian play, it's all just very natural. We don't sit and work a lot of stuff out, we just play and it seems to gel. No one has to be told what to do, and it all comes out sounding like Maiden."

Janick has two writing credits on the new album: the short, sharp and catchy *Stratego* and the woozy, menacing *The Time Machine*, both co-written with Steve Harris. But it's the sheer open-ended, creative free-for-all that Maiden continue to enjoy in the studio that seems to delight him the most.

"I just think we still surprise each other. I've never been in a band with so many ideas. There are so many ideas flowing in all the time, and so many that never get used! When you look at the amount of stuff that's on this album... in the past, an album would be 40 minutes long. These are like triple albums!"

And do you agree with Bruce that Nicko is on particularly brilliant form on this album?

"Ah, yes, Nicko is playing great. He's a powerhouse," Janick replies. "He powers the band. He *pushes* the band. He's got an incredible

Maiden live shows are on their way! Thank whichever deity you can think of

"WE WOULD RATHER PUT OUR EMOTIONS INTO SHOWS THAN GO ON A CHAT SHOW AND TALK ABOUT IT"

BRUCE DICKINSON

personality – there's about five of him I think! Ha ha ha! But he's incredible. You need that powerhouse behind you. He's 70 next year? He's playing like a teen. It's incredible. I've never heard him so solid. I don't think you can tour, the way we've toured over the years, and not be fit. If your mind's clear and you're fit and healthy, then you're playing better and being creative. So we're all fit… for old men…"

At just under 82 minutes long and rammed to the gills with epic, exhilarating moments, *Senjutsu* is an album that will doubtless tick every conceivable box for discerning fans of Iron Maiden. But there are numerous moments when the band sound more fiercely imaginative than ever before. Again, the opening title track stands out as particularly astonishing: palpably heavier than anything Maiden have recorded in the past, and yet graced with a soaring vocal performance from Bruce that will *definitely* cause grown metalheads to become a bit misty-eyed. It's no kind of typical Maiden song, and yet could not be the work of anyone else, right down to Steve Harris's hazily cryptic tales of – at least we *think* – threatened imperial walls and swarming, warring tribes in ancient Japan.

"Steve picked that as the title track. I don't know why, but he suddenly got bitten by the Japanese bug," Bruce states. "I've been trying to find out the origin of the word 'Senjutsu' and there seem to be multiple variants, but as far as Steve's concerned, it means 'The Art Of War'. But to be honest, I don't really care. It's a good excuse for chopping things up with samurai swords! The album is not a concept album. The cover has a concept and it's Eddie as a samurai, so that's great. I love his transformation into a samurai in the video. But the rest of the album? It's not a concept album about that at all. It's a collection of different songs."

And what songs they are. Noticeably dominated by notions of war, death and the endtimes, *Senjutsu* seems to exhibit some form of faint kinship with 2006's *A Matter Of Life And Death*: for many, the pick of Maiden's post-millennial studio albums, and

THE NUMBER OF THE EAST

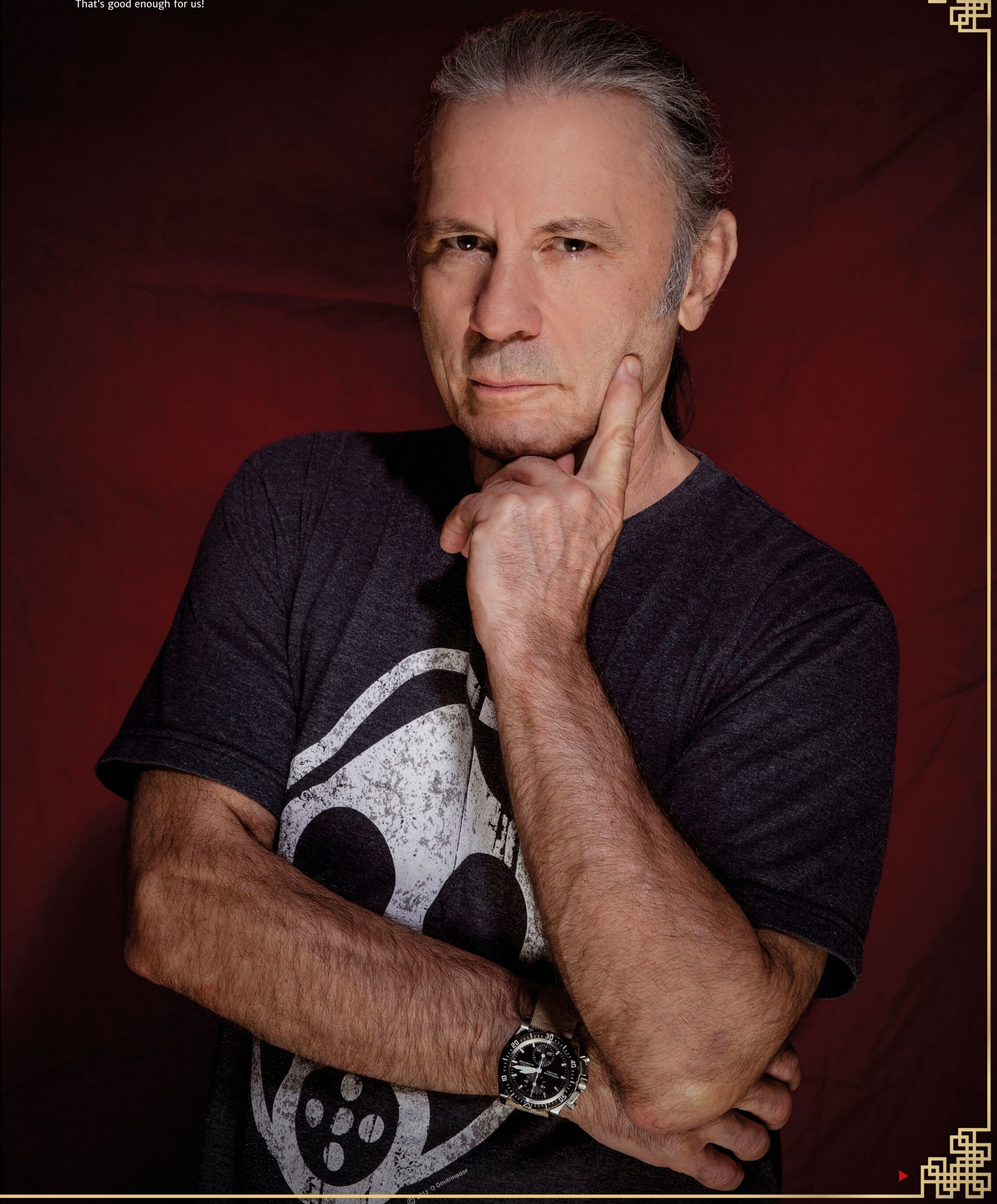
We asked Takahide Okami, Editor at *Metal Hammer* Japan, for his take on Iron Maiden's new musical and visual direction

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT *SENJUTSU*'S FIRST SINGLE, *THE WRITING ON THE WALL*?
"This song has beautiful melody lines reminiscent of *Rime Of The Ancient Mariner* and *The Wicker Man*, regardless of their different tempos. From the intro arpeggio, the level of expectation rises as if something is likely to happen. In some senses, this is a straightforward song that won't explode in the venue, but it acts as a teaser for how the album will develop. Or it could work at the very end of their show, maybe…"

WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF SAMURAI EDDIE?
"Very early on [in 1981], Eddie had a katana [a long, curved, single-edged sword traditionally used by samurai] on the *Maiden Japan* EP artwork. He was shown wrestling a Sumo on the merchandise for 2016's performance at Ryōgoku Kokugikan – a sumo wrestling hall – and now he's become a wild samurai! From the album artwork, it seems as if he is from the Heian (794-1185 AD) to the Kamakura (1185-1333 AD) era. If so, he is a samurai from the wildest times – that is very Eddie."

AND HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT A JAPAN-THEMED IRON MAIDEN ERA?
"For us being Japanese, it is a delightful thing, but including the record title, *Senjutsu*, there is a slight question of, 'Why Japan now?' Ha ha! In the past, there were quite a few times that Iron Maiden's Japanese shows were cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances [in 2020 at the height of the pandemic, and 2011 due to the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami]. We hope that soon, Eddie will be wielding a sharp katana to fight against Janick Gers onstage!"

Bruce says *Senjutsu* is “a step up”.
That’s good enough for us!



Steve Harris: "bitten by the Japanese bug" and all about 'The Art Of War'

another record with a prevailing atmosphere of war-torn dread. Bruce is eager to point out that *Senjutsu* was all written and recorded before the pandemic, and so if the new songs seem to reflect ongoing dark times, it is more due to (un)happy coincidence than anything more deliberate. Instead, Maiden continue to demonstrate how it is still possible to conjure universal themes that resonate widely, even in an increasingly divided age. Notably, the melancholic and brooding *Darkest Hour* delves into the achievements and personal turmoil of no lesser figure than Winston Churchill, with results that are poignant, unsettling and proudly representative of the human experience in all its infinitely complex and daunting splendour.

"Yeah, Churchill is a case in point," says Bruce. "You've got somebody who was a very flawed character. He suffered from depression, he was probably a functioning alcoholic. But at the one time when it actually mattered, he stood up, when other people would've rolled over. You've got to be prepared to fight sometimes, for what you believe in and for your freedom. Here was a man who was riddled with self-doubt, no matter what the external perception was."

"IT'S NOT ABOUT PLAYING THE SAME SONGS OVER AND OVER"

JANICK GERS

A lot of Maiden music seems to be about survival, resilience and heroism, and this album more than most…

"A *lot* of it is about self-sacrifice. It might be in a wartime environment or situation, but war brings out the worst *and* best in everything. From nuclear power stations to satellites, our entire modern world is largely based on what NASA and the Soviet Union developed in the space programme. The reason they developed it was not that they were just dreamers; it was because it was a pissing contest between two psychopathic empires! And you can't take the complexity out of human relations like that, unfortunately. We are what we are."

Despite Maiden's reputation for writing songs about historical events and real-world battles, the band have also mined a rich seam of introspection and existential meandering over the last four decades. Outwardly, of course, Maiden are eternally invincible: undisputed gods of heavy metal, revered around the world, and visibly having a rather lovely time doing it. But songs from the new album like *Darkest Hour* and grandiloquent finale *Hell On Earth* (the latter written by Steve Harris) continue to add to

THE ART OF WAR

Illustrator Mark Wilkinson created not just one, but two new Eddies! Here's how he came up with *Senjutsu*'s killer artwork

WHAT WAS YOUR BRIEF FOR *SENJUTSU*?
"Iron Maiden's management sent me the title first, and then a 'mood board' from Steve. He emailed a few pages of reference pictures collaged together. There were samurai warriors and creatures from Japanese oni mythology – demons or ogres with one or more horns growing out of their heads, plus an extra set of fangs. There were kabuki masks and tattoos, Japanese water dragons... all sorts. It was up to me to interpret it."

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT DESIGNING A NEW VERSION OF SOMETHING AS ICONIC AS EDDIE?
"I knew I would have difficulty just plonking Eddie into a samurai costume. The higher caste warriors usually had many layers of highly ornate, dense fabric both to protect and pad them out on the battlefield – I couldn't see such a costume working for the skeletal figure of Eddie. Besides, he would look far too flamboyant. I also resisted putting the traditional samurai helmet on his head. It would cover too much detail of the early kabuki-style 'mask' of red warpaint I had sketched out for him. The helmet 'cowl' and 'fukigaeshi' earpieces were like skin and bone attachments. Eddie's head was like a cyborg – part creature, part machine – especially with all the bashed-in metal and torn rustic leather of the rest of his costume."

WHAT CHALLENGES DID YOU FACE?
"It worked front-on, because the details merged into the shadows, but as soon as I tried to visualise Eddie from the side, it was less effective. I knew Iron Maiden would want a vast catalogue of images, so I had a problem! I asked a friend of mine, Michael Knowland, a brilliant 3D artist who worked on the game *The Last Of Us*, to help me visualise the head and 'bolted-on' samurai parts. Mike sculpted the head and shoulders so I could work out the angles and shadows needed for further illustrations. It sort of worked – we kept the fierceness of the kabuki mask, but it still didn't look that convincing for any other angle, apart from the front. I suggested to Steve that I ought to try the helmet. I created the design and asked Mike to sculpt it to see how it might fit the model we already had."

WHAT DID STEVE THINK OF IT?
"He liked both illustrations and called me one day to suggest that we have a double front cover – we'd use both! Eddie is all things to all the fans anyway, a mythical creature, so why not present him as the oni demon – an invisible spirit – but also as the sentient being of a samurai when in battle. It made perfect sense!"

a palpable sense that both lyricists have experienced a few dark nights of the soul along the way.

"Yeah, the difference is, I suppose, that Steve and I would both rather put that into shows and albums than go onto chat shows and talk about it," Bruce counters. "I know Steve has quite a deep-seated distrust of what we think of as being the modern world. To the extent that in *Hell On Earth*, the song is saying 'Are we done here yet? Can we just start again and I'll see you in another life, on the other side, when we've all gone back to normal?'"

So what exactly is normal at this point? A stunning new Iron Maiden album is definitely a good start, so that's nice. Some face-shredding live shows would be even nicer, and those are absolutely coming too. Maiden return to the Legacy Of The Beast tour next summer, with a Download appearance on June 11 firmly on the schedule and, according to Janick, the vague promise of at least a couple of songs from *Senjutsu* being added to that already well-established setlist. Meanwhile, Bruce has fully recovered from a recent hip replacement operation and is, in his own words, "jumping around all over the place" in anticipation of a return to the stage. Maiden are back and it's all kicking off. All things considered, that sounds pretty close to normal to us.

"*Senjutsu* hasn't been so long in the making, just long in the waiting!" Bruce declares, sounding genuinely exasperated at it all. "This album is a step up. *A Matter Of Life And Death* was really good. I've gone back and revisited it a little bit, and I thought, 'Shit, that was really good album.' With this one, I'd go back to an album like *Brave New World*, which I think was a *fantastic* record. So I'm *really* chuffed with this one."

"It's not about going out and playing the same songs over and over again. If you're still creating stuff, then that's what makes you valid," Janick concludes. "There's always something new coming from Maiden. We're excited about doing it all again and getting back on the road. Sure, we're not getting any younger, and who knows about the future? But right now, we're creatively *buzzing*. I think we're still at the top of our game."

***SENJUTSU* IS OUT NOW VIA PARLOPHONE.**
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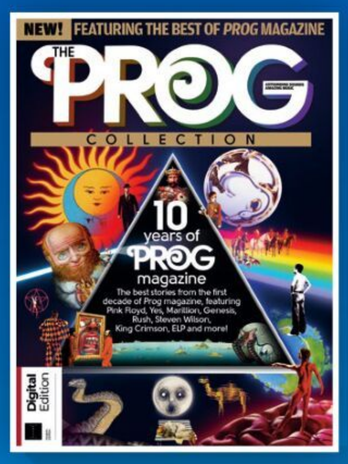

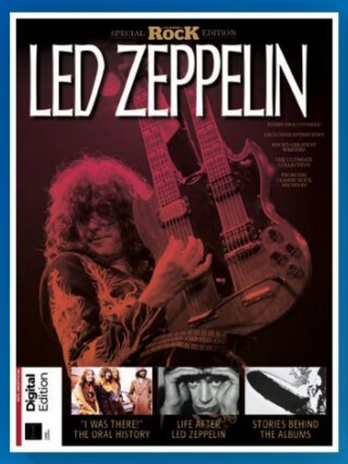

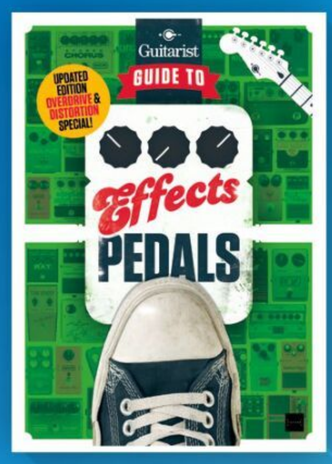

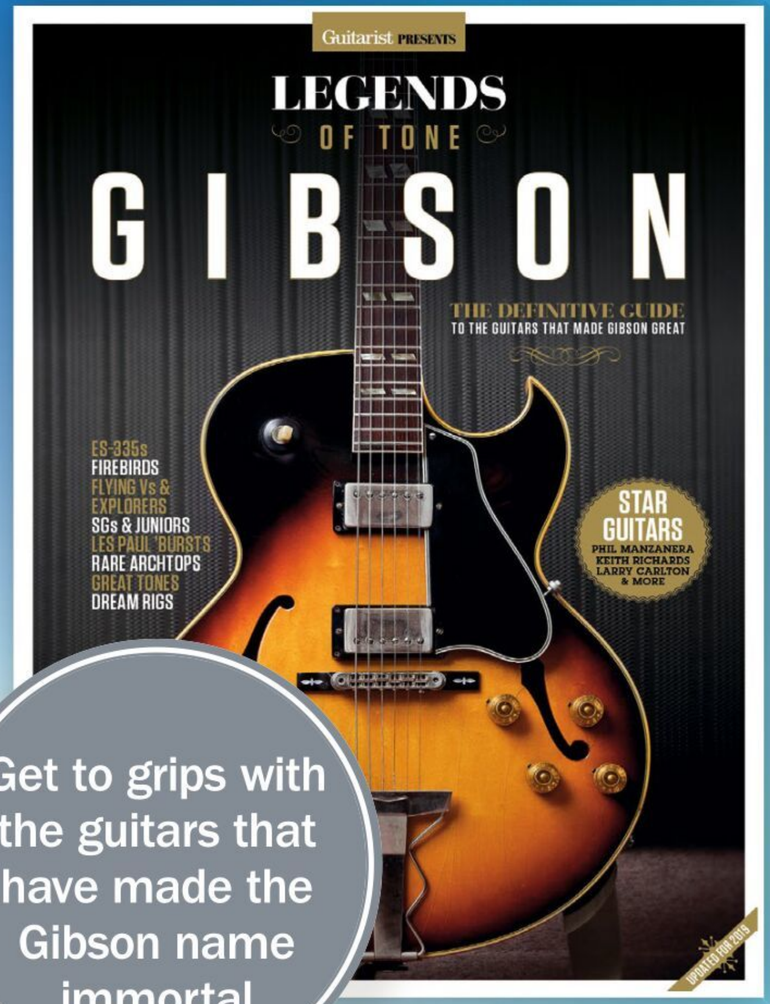

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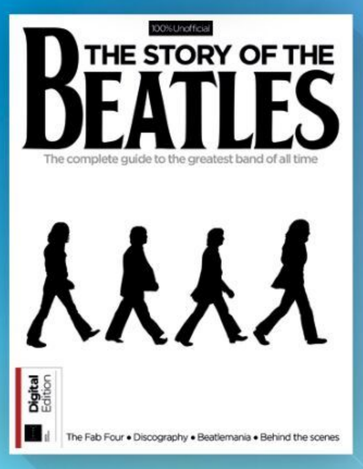

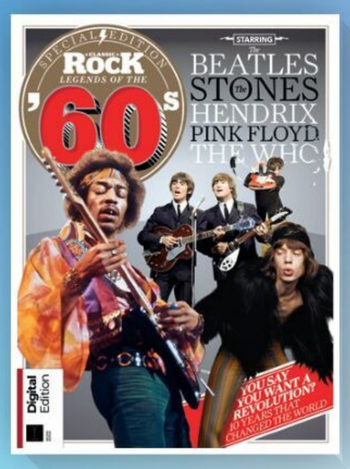

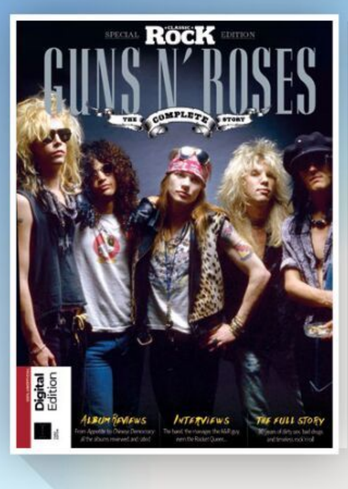

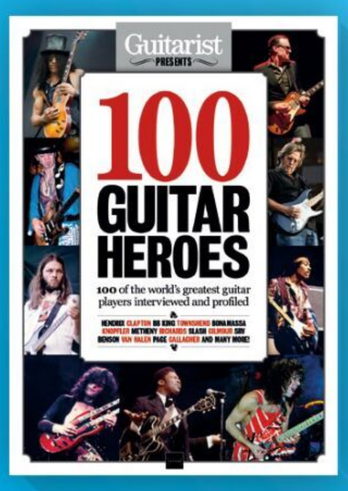

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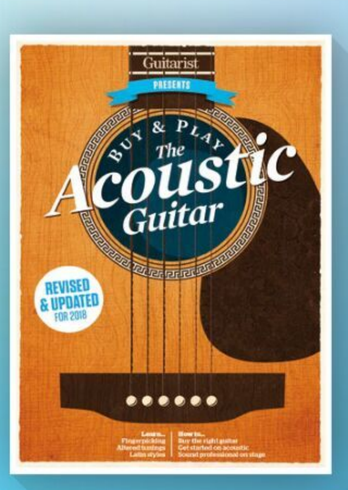

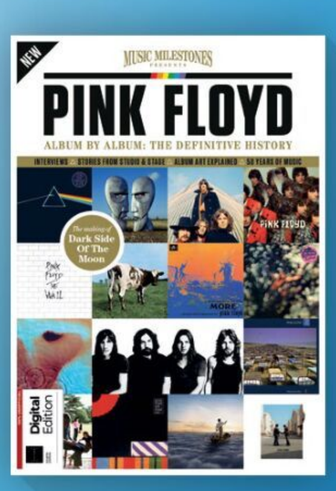

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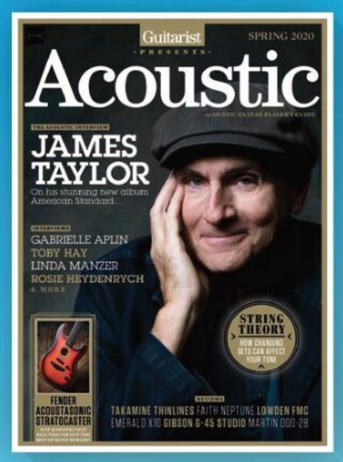

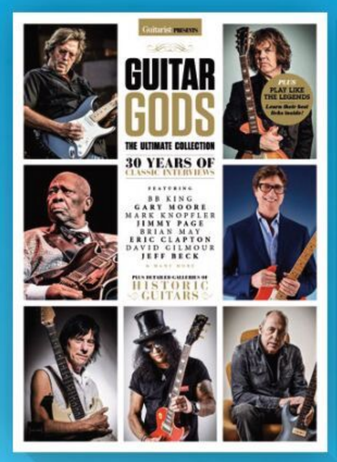

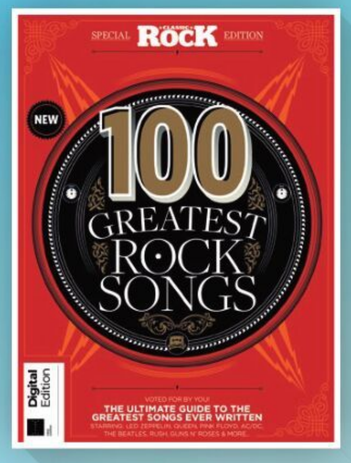

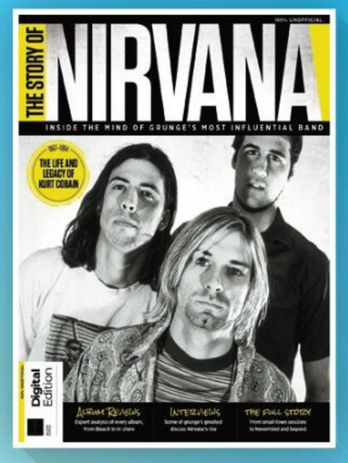

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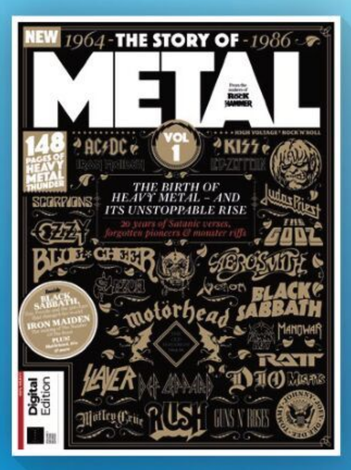

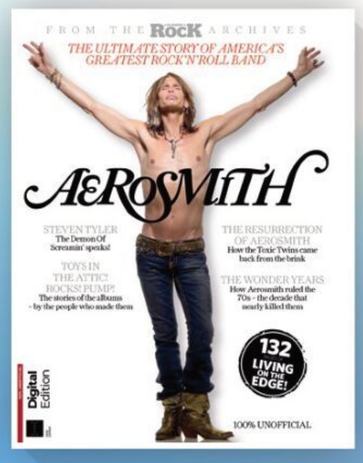

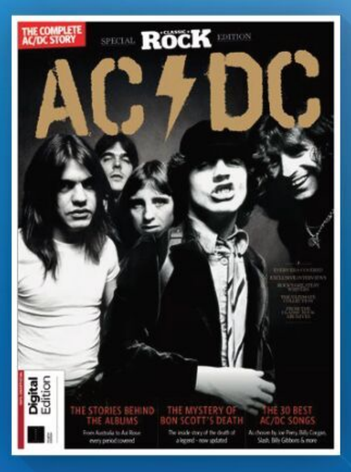

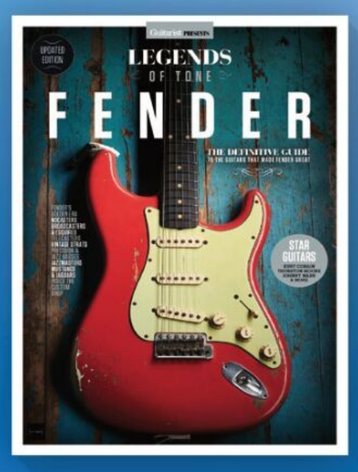

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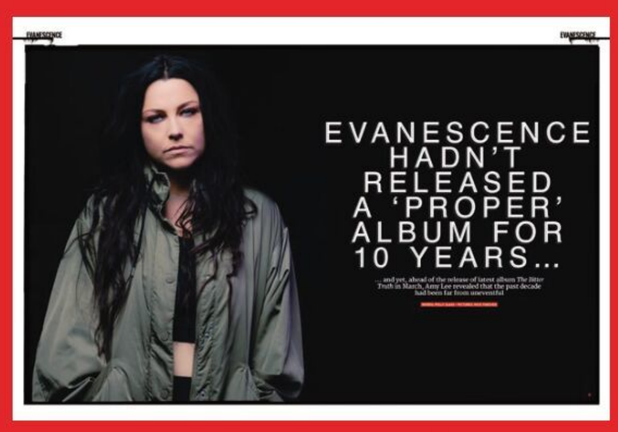

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